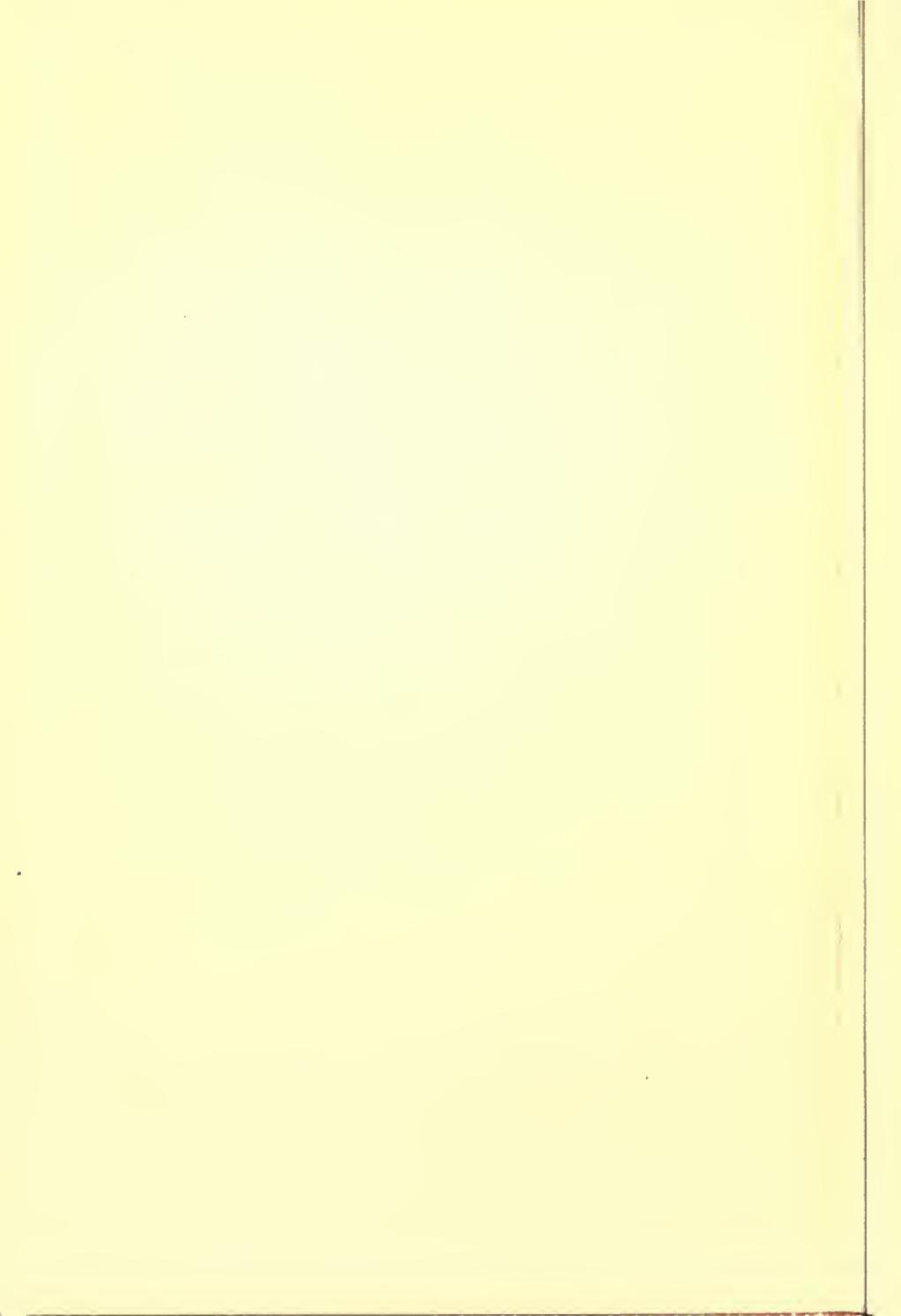


*The* RED  
PAPER

C. C. HOTCHKISS



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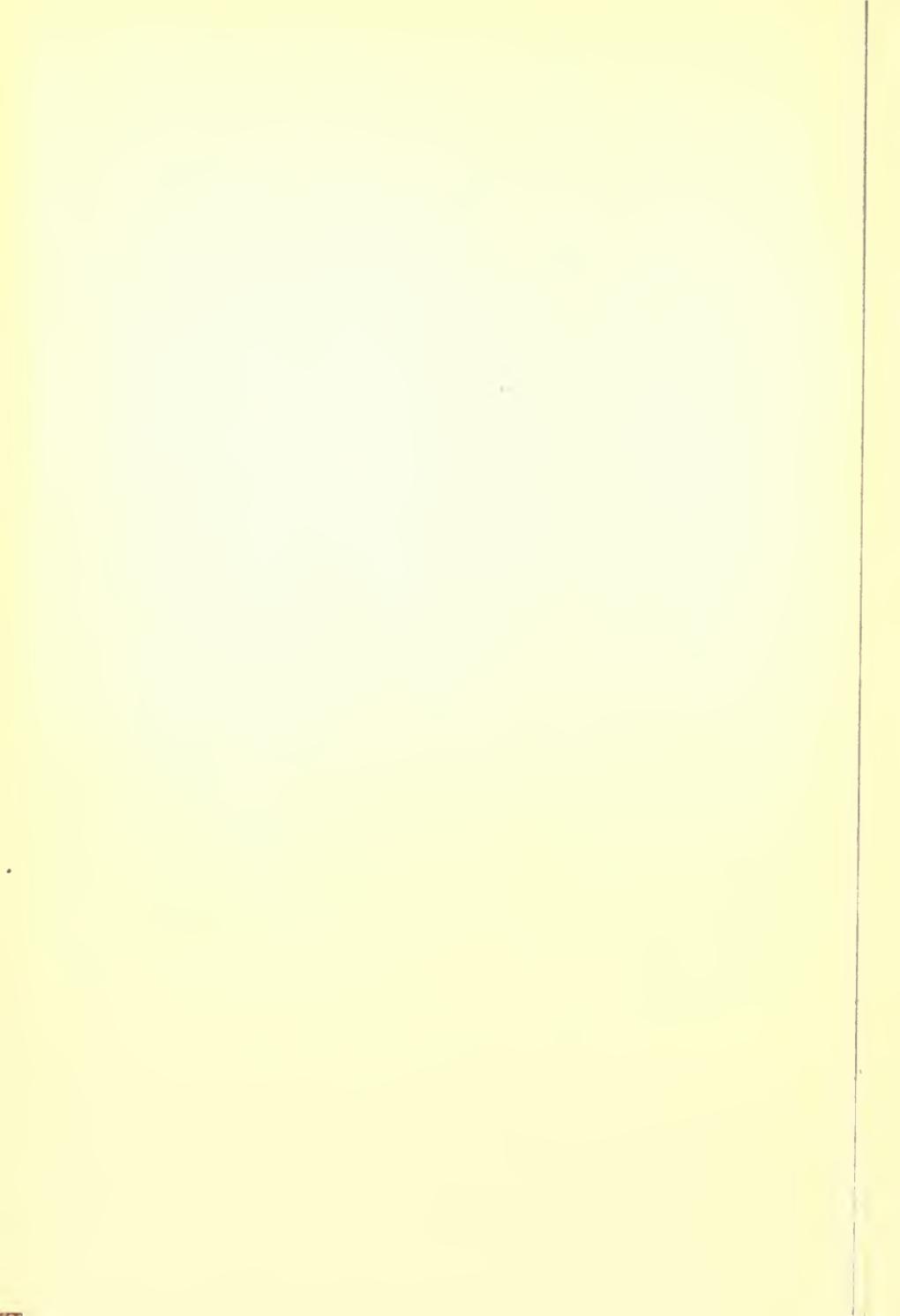
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THE RED PAPER



"How—how long have I been this way?" asked John.

# THE RED PAPER

By

C. C.  
HOTCHKISS

*Author of*  
“BETSY ROSS”  
*etc.~Illustrations*  
*by WILL GREFE’*



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# THE RED PAPER



# THE RED PAPER

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## CHAPTER I

### THE CONFESSION

IT was growing late, and the September night held the breathless character of heat and humidity with which New York is usually cursed in July. Even the Great White Way, awakening to the new "season," sagged under the depressing influence of the weather. The crowds moved sluggishly, finding exertion attended with inconvenience and discomfort; there was little unnecessary traffic; conventional society perspired within doors; the less fortunate element patronized front stoops, while the proletariat took to the house-tops. In the up-town side streets it was very quiet.

As John Wentworth turned into Madison Avenue and came before his own door he saw a man smoking a cigarette as he lounged against the low, cut-stone wall bounding the narrow strip of earth between the pavement and the building, the heavy air bringing to his nostrils the odor of Cuban tobacco.

Wentworth barely noticed him and was about to go up the broad steps when the stranger disconnected himself from the wall, moved forward and accosted him.

"*Señor*, will you kindly tell me the hour?"

There was nothing offensive or threatening in the request, nor did the man who made it look dangerous; but being a thorough New Yorker and wise in his own generation, Wentworth did not attempt to consult his watch. "It is half-past ten," he said, making a shrewd guess, at the same instant, in a comprehensive glance, taking in the details of the questioner.

By his accent, manner and appearance the latter was plainly a foreigner. His dark hair hung almost to his shoulders, and there was just light enough for Wentworth to catch his expression and to see that his face was adorned with a mustache and goatee. The young man smiled as he realized that he had been suspicious of one whose slight, well-dressed body would have been no match for his own muscular and athletic figure.

At the answer the stranger waved a small, well-shaped hand. "Much thanks, *Señor. Buenos noches.*" At that he turned and strolled up the avenue with the deliberate slowness of one without an object other than a desire to kill time.

Wentworth reached the top step, and while feeling for his latch-key turned and looked after him. The young man appeared to be the embodiment of all that was fortunate, yet, in truth, while at the high

tide of physical health and harmony, subconsciously he was far from being satisfied with himself. Even as he stood there watching the receding figure he was vaguely aware that he was wasting his powers in ease, or at an avocation which at best was hardly more than piffling; but he lacked the incentive to put his latent strength of mind and body into effective play. He had nothing to ruffle him in the way of a lack of money, nothing to disturb his temper in the way of enmity or jealousy, nothing to stir his blood through being loved by or loving a woman. He was moving on a sluggish current of self-ease, and, unknown to himself, was being mildly punished by the law demanding sacrifice as an exchange for happiness.

Born to the purple and the silver spoon, his life had been such as naturally to extinguish high ambition; but his pride of self and family was great, fantastically so; it represented honor, and its honor had never been impugned. Had John Wentworth known what he lacked, he would have supplied the want; but at present he only felt the surge of something the nature of which he did not realize. It was not social aspiration. For "society" he cared nothing, having but few close friends and but one intimate. He did not know what he wished; there was no recognized want he could name, but the unimportant incident of meeting the stranger, who by this was out of sight, seemed somehow to accentuate a rising protest at his own uselessness, though

there was nothing in the trifling circumstance of the encounter that seemed to bear any relation to himself or his affairs. With an impatient jerk at the bunch of keys which had become jammed in his pocket, he turned and let himself into the house.

The front hall was dark, and Wentworth was about to go upstairs to his own rooms when he noticed the library door was open, the soft light from within showing at the further end of the broad passage. It told him that his father had not yet retired. He hung up his hat and went down the hall for a good-night word with his parent.

Captain Wentworth was nervously writing at a broad mahogany table desk strewn with papers, the glow from an intricately twisted electrolier falling on his thick and disordered white hair. His bushy white eyebrows were contracted, and he was fiercely biting the short ends of his closely trimmed white mustache. His was a handsome head, but one could see by his paleness and the lines of his face that he was physically depleted; indeed, he had the appearance of one whose nerves were being ground to a fine edge. A small lacquered table stood at his elbow and on it were a decanter of wine, a cut-glass ice-pitcher covered with beads of moisture, some glasses, and a plate of sweet biscuits. The air of the sumptuously furnished room was hot and close, notwithstanding the swung-back French windows.

As the front door closed the old gentleman abruptly ceased writing and listened, and as he heard his son's footsteps coming down the marble floor of the hall he hurriedly but carefully slipped the sheet on which he had been at work under the leather-lined, pink blotting pad before him. He had but just concealed the paper when the young man appeared.

"You are pegging at it a bit too hard, dad," said John affectionately as he paused by his father and noted the strained expression of his face. "You should be abed, sir."

Captain Wentworth ran his hand nervously up the thin gold chain attached to his eye-glasses, and removing them, settled back in his pivoted chair and swung round to face his son.

"I know it, Jack, I know it." He spoke with a gasp, as though short of breath from excitement or exertion.

"What's the necessity, dad?"

In return the old gentleman looked at the young man as though he envied the fine lines of the tall, athletic figure; then, ignoring the question, he passed his hand over his eyes and asked abruptly: "Where have you come from, Jack?"

"From the Grand Central, after seeing Tom Harper off on his hunt. We had been at my laboratory, or studio, or whatever you may choose to call it."

"Delectable amusement there, I suppose!" The elder man looked at his son as if measuring him for a purpose, his face very serious; the other, who

was selecting a cigarette from the case he took from his pocket, did not notice the critical glance. His answer was nonchalant.

"I have comfortable quarters there, certainly. When are you going to honor me with a call?"

"I don't know. What does it all amount to, Jack?"

John Wentworth smiled. "Amount to? Is that a conundrum? Well, I hardly hope to get a painting hung in the Academy, or have more than honorable mention in the photographers' exhibition. I can't say I possess a high order of ambition—but—delectable amusement, most decidedly!"

The old gentleman made no direct answer to this, but continued to gaze fixedly at his son, his broad chest heaving with every breath as if his lungs lacked air.

"Has Thomas gone to bed?" he finally asked.

"I presume so. The house seems locked for the night, save here." John glanced at the opened windows.

"Then shut the door."

The words were so abrupt that the young man looked closely at his father before he obeyed. As he turned back from the door and lighted his cigarette he noticed the captain's labored breathing.

"You are done up, dad."

"I am. God! If I could have but your youth, your strength!" The outburst was sudden and apparently uncalled for. The young man bent

forward and looked with astonishment at his father, but the old gentleman's eye reassured him.

"Why this dramatic desperation, dad?" he asked.

"Desperate, indeed, my son!" was the serious return. "Sit down, Jack. I've got to talk to you—if I can—but I haven't been able to take a deep breath all day."

"The old trouble?"

The captain nodded and tapped his chest over his heart. "My boy," he began, with an air of dogged determination, "I have never given you an intimate insight into my affairs; not because I was afraid to trust you; not because I thought you lacked either sense or sympathy, but because your tastes and mine have been along such different lines. My days have been devoted to business—yours have been passed in ambling along the easy road of a dilettante. To me you were unpractical, though I have not disturbed you by attempting to force your thoughts into different channels. But the time has come, Jack, when against my wish and by the force of necessity I am compelled to talk to you. Indeed, the necessity has existed for some time—but I have shied at it—I have feared it."

The speaker paused and struggled for a deep breath. His son looked at him, his face showing a mixture of perplexity, anxiety and interrogation, but he said nothing, and the cigarette between his lips burned on uninhaled. The captain evidently saw the suppressed question in the young man's

face, for after a spasmodic heaving of his broad shoulders he continued:

"I saw the doctor again to-day. He told me I must quit at once—go to Europe—or somewhere, but he won't guarantee my life for an hour. I know my condition quite as well as he, and—" He hesitated.

"Well?" The word came after a moment of deep silence, the blood slowly leaving the face of the young man as he stared at his father.

"And I don't care how soon it is over!" said the captain, with a determination and abruptness that spoke volumes of his mental state.

"Dad!" The exclamation was explosive and protesting. The old gentleman lifted his hand in deprecation.

"No—I mean it, Jack. When a man gets to be sixty years of age he has become disillusioned, no matter how optimistic he has been. If it were not for one's youth and consequent blindness life would be voted a failure by nearly every honest man arriving at my age. But that aside, Jack. You have your mother's patrimony; you have used it as suited yourself. How does it stand?"

"I have increased it a trifle, sir," was the rather mechanical response, as the young man threw away the cigarette which was scorching his mustache.

"That is good, Jack! That is good—and fortunate—for from me you will get next to nothing. I—I—" He stopped, mastered by his emotion.

"Are you trying to explain to me that you have met with losses?" asked the other, a new light springing to his eye. "Why beat about the bush, dad? All I have shall be at your command, and —"

The old gentleman stopped him by again lifting his hand. "No, Jack. If it were only that it would be simple enough. You have the generosity of the unselfish and the unthinking. I thank you. But it is not that, nor do I mean that my state of health is hopeless. I may live for some years, or I may not, but—" Again he hesitated.

The oppressive grip on John Wentworth's heart loosened a trifle. If the matter troubling his father was not a question of money or a question of health it could not be serious. The young man's voice took a soothing tone as he cast off his load, lighted another cigarette, and said:

"You are far overwrought, dad. The heat is something awful. You've had a bad day—you've had them before. Don't talk any more tonight."

The captain shook his white head. "It is not altogether that. It is not the heat, nor the bad day—I'm used to them. Listen to me. I must tell you, for if anything should happen to me, the matter would devolve on you for a time—until a new trustee could be appointed."

"Trustee! For whom?"

"Grace Merridale. She soon comes of age. Her papers are in the deposit vaults. You didn't know

of this—you don't know her—but you have heard me speak of David Merridale—of Texas—my old friend—since the days we were at sea together? He was indeed my David!"

"Yes. I know."

"Well, he made me trustee for his daughter, Grace, under his will. The amount of the scheduled estate is small—but there is another matter—a paper—he gave me to hold for his daughter. This is a trust outside of the trust at law—it is a personal trust. David handed the paper to me while he was dying—dying in my arms, Jack—dying from exhaustion after a trip across the Texas desert."

The old gentleman labored as he spoke. He stopped, and, turning to the table at his elbow, poured out a glass of wine which he drank off. It appeared to stimulate him, for with something more of vigor and less of distress, he went on. "Jack, you would scarcely believe that so much was involved in a bit of paper not a legal document—a paper that would be meaningless to you—a square of red paper, for that is all it appears to be; and stranger yet will you consider the place where it is deposited."

"And where is that?" asked the young man, hardly curious after his recent strain. There could be nothing serious in this. He knew his father's sense of punctilious honor, a sense he had himself inherited, and thought that perhaps the old gentleman might have placed the paper in some institution the name of which he was about to tell. Captain Went-

worth lifted his hand and pointed to a painting hung on the wall behind his son.

"John, in the back of that picture the paper in question is hidden." He stopped as if to witness the effect of the strange statement.

Young Wentworth's eyes were again filled with troubled wonder as he mechanically turned and glanced at the picture indicated. He knew it well enough. It had been one of his own first efforts, and had been kept by his father more as a souvenir than for any artistic value. It was hung high over the mantel and out of easy reach.

"Something of a romantic cast, this, dad," he said, with a strained endeavor at ease of manner, for he had little doubt that for the moment his father was suffering from some sudden mental disturbance; the whole interview had been strange. "Isn't it a queer place for you to hide a paper of worth?"

"You may think it strange, Jack. Perhaps it is. To you the thing would appear meaningless—merely a bit of colored paper, only, but I repeat, it belongs to Grace Merridale on her coming of age, and does not go to her as a legal right—it is not included in her father's will. It becomes a matter of honor to me—or to you—to see that she gets it. My son, that paper is of incalculable value to any one with a full knowledge of its character and contents."

"Then, why have you not kept it in the deposit-vaults—with the legal matter?" interrupted the other, now somewhat impressed.

He had known of the Merridales, father and daughter; but, as they had always lived in Texas, he had never seen them. He knew that David Merridale had, indeed, been a David to Captain Wentworth's Jonathan; that they had been loyal friends since the days when they had been on the sea, though both had long since forsaken the ocean. But why such an intensely practical man as was his father should conceive the romantic idea of hiding a valuable document in a picture in his own library, where it might meet with destruction, he was at a loss to understand.

At the question put by his son, the captain wet his lips with his tongue, and his paleness was for a moment overcome by a slight flush.

"I had it in the vaults," he said impressively, "but I could not keep it there. I am telling you this that you may know—" He ceased abruptly; then, grasping the arms of his chair in a grip so firm that it turned his knuckles white, he leaned forward. "My Heaven! John! The worry over that paper—the temptation of it—is killing me. My peace lies in parting with it—yet my honor guards it."

The captain had cast aside restraint; his voice was raised. His son looked at him as if fascinated; in reality, he was stunned by this exhibition, and his half-consumed cigarette fell to the floor as he bit through it. There was hardly a moment of silence before the captain went on, an inward excitement becoming more and more outwardly visible. He

held his hands toward his son as though in appeal. "John, I have come to it at last! I am a ruined man! Not through speculation or unwise investment; I never was money-mad or had enough to play with, but—but I have been haunted until that paper alone can satisfy the demand of the vampire who has sucked my blood for ten years. Ten years, Jack! I am almost spent—ruined by a blackmailer!"

The young man got unsteadily to his feet. "Blackmailed! You, blackmailed!" he exclaimed, his dark eyes distended with astonishment. The old man, now pale from exertion, nodded.

"Yes; for an unwarranted act in my early life. I dare not tell you. It has been hanging over my conscience for forty years, and for the last ten has threatened me like the sword of Damocles. Under it I have been broken physically and financially—and the finish is near. I am at the end of my resources. I have robbed your future, but—but"—his hands clenched—"the final price I will not pay. *I will not pay!* It is a matter of my honor."

## CHAPTER II

### A TRAGEDY

FOR a few moments the two men looked at each other, the younger one standing, his eyes wide and his emotion too great to admit of action. Had his father struck him he would have been less incapable of thought and speech.

He felt like one who had gone gaily along a pleasant path to find himself suddenly confronting a yawning precipice, and he was as well aware in that moment that his easy, devil-may-care life had come to a full stop as he was later when the prospect became a certainty.

It was the captain who first broke the oppressive silence—a silence so profound that the ticking of the French clock on the cabinet mantel dominated all other sounds. He raised himself slowly, and smiled a wan, forced smile.

“I need not have been so violent—so brutally violent,” he said, quite calmly and with a slight wave of his hand. “The matter got the better of me. The excitement was bad—bad! I was told to guard against it. But I am glad I spoke, John. I think

I feel better for it, though it took all my nerve-force."

The young man seemed to awake from a dream.

"I am not sure I know what has happened," he said, passing his hand over his eyes. "I hope I have misunderstood you, sir."

"I spoke plainly enough, I think," returned the other, with the uncalled-for testiness of the heart sufferer, who can usually brook neither stupidity nor opposition.

"Possibly," returned the young man, ignoring his father's tone, "but I still feel somewhat abroad, and have not yet got the thing into proper mental focus. I only made out two concrete facts, sir. First, a paper is hidden in a picture; and, second, that you have been the victim of someone—you did not mention whom. What are the relations between the two? I'll answer for the settlement of your enemy, if you will give me his name and tell me where he can be found."

"Which is tantamount to expressing a desire to ruin your family's reputation! It was to save this that has brought me so low!"

"But, sir, I have a right to know, even if you forbid me to act."

"Yes—but not to-night. I am not equal to it. I have spent myself."

"And when, then?" There was little softness in the young man's voice, and his attitude was truculent, though the latter did not reflect on the

old gentleman who now sat in his chair in a semi-collapsed state; but the question was eagerly put, and demanded an answer.

"To-morrow, perhaps. Yes, to-morrow. But not this way, John. I can write and be calm. I will write it all."

"And the name of—him?"

"Yes—everything."

"You promise?"

"I promise. I have only this to say now. Never part with that paper until you can place it in the hands of Grace Merridale. She will be of age in two months. Your responsibility will be short. I will write an explanation of its nature, for she would know nothing about it—no more than you. And be careful, for if that monstrous villain should become aware—"

"No more to-night, dad," interrupted the young man, as he saw signs of a return of his father's excitement. "Write it all out to-morrow. Let me help you upstairs."

"No—no; I am all right again," said the old gentleman, impatient at the interruption. "Go to bed yourself. I will follow soon. It is not yet eleven. I will read awhile; I could not sleep now. Good-night, John."

It was a curt dismissal, but it might as well have been a command, for the son had always respected his father's slightest wish. He hesitated a moment, then laid one hand on the captain's shoulder and

held out the other. He had not been so demonstrative in years.

"Good-night, dad. Whatever has been—or whatever is to be, we are as one in this."

His father grasped the outstretched hand and his eyes became moist. "Good-night, Jack. God bless you, my lad. I have been foolish to bear this load alone for I might have known I could depend on you to help me out. I wish I had spoken before. I might have been saved much."

With a feeling too deep to be expressed in words the young man turned and left the library, but he did not go to his own apartments. Sleep, or even bed, was out of the question for him. Like one dazed by a blow which still left him part of his faculties, he took his hat from the broad antlers which hung in the hall, and went into the hot, still night, closing the door softly behind him. As he did so he felt that he had forever shut out his old life—that a new epoch had dawned for him; but the idea was misty and lacked detail; it did not startle him.

As the white-haired man in the library heard the front door close behind his son he threw aside the book he had taken from the table, shook his fist at the imaginary presence of someone; then with an air of determination and with a grim smile on his handsome mouth he drew a sheet of paper before him and began to write to his son. It was perhaps fortunate that he did not take out and complete the letter he was writing earlier in the evening.

John Wentworth walked up the avenue with his head in something of a whirl. He had received a distinct shock. To him it seemed impossible that his father could have laid himself open to blackmail, and that the honorable name of his family was in danger of being publicly smirched. The young man had been too bewildered to inquire into the nature of the fault (he dared not call it crime) for which his father suffered, and he knew that even had he thought to, he could not have asked. Unless his father voluntarily revealed this mysterious act of his youth, he, his son, could not force his confidence.

And to John Wentworth it made little difference whether or not his parent was guilty; he was too loyal to his blood, too proud of his name, to fail to spring to the defense of that which was dear to him. It was all too mysterious for his open nature. He tried to throw it from his mind, but failed. Like the refrain of a popular air which sometimes catches the brain and echoes through it until it becomes unbearable, the words "blackmail" and "crime" sang in John Wentworth's ears. He was impatient for the morrow when he hoped he would know all and could determine how to act; and after that—what?

He walked along like a man in a dream and without more definite object than to keep moving. Of the presumably important subject—the paper concealed in the painting—he did not think at all, and the name of Merridale did not once enter his head. At Fifty-ninth Street he turned into Central Park and

strode through the black shadows without realizing his whereabouts. What paths he traced he never knew, but he was finally brought to himself by a policeman, who demanded his business there at that hour. He pulled out his watch. It was one o'clock. Wentworth came to himself. "I think I have no business here," he said. "I did not realize how late it was."

"Walkin' off a still, like as not! Don't you know where you are?" asked the patrolman.

"I'm afraid not," said Wentworth, looking around.

"Well, yer at the upper end of Central Park, and you'll get right out into the street. Who are you, anyhow?"

"I am a respectable citizen, at least," returned the young man, a trifle upset in his dignity, as he produced his card bearing his name and residence.

"We'll let it go at that," said the other. "You had better be home and in bed. Go straight ahead and out, me man, and don't let me see you around here again."

Indignant, yet feeling a vague sense of humility, Wentworth left the park and turned east to Fifth Avenue. From there he strode homeward, his brain in better order from his encounter, though it was far from being settled. Nearly an hour later he swung into his own street; and as he neared his home, he saw the lights in his father's library were still burning at full blast, and that the windows were yet wide open. There was something in the

sight that hurried his heart and steps, and turning the corner, he bounded up the stoop.

In a moment more he was in the hall, dark now, as the library door was closed. Feeling his way through the gloom, Wentworth reached the door, and, without the formality of knocking, threw it open. The conditions meeting his sight caused him to stagger back with a quick cry.

At first glance the room seemed to be in great confusion. Papers covered the carpet; the desk-chair was upset, the drawers of the writing-table were either wide open or pulled out entirely and lay on the floor. In front of the open fireplace was the body of Captain Wentworth, flat on his back, arms outstretched and collar and necktie torn as if from a struggle.

With a bound John was at his father's side; but he knew the old gentleman was dead, even before he placed his hand over the still heart. When he did so he drew it back quickly. It was wet, not with blood, but with ice-water. The captain's shirt and vest were soaked, his white hair was matted with water, and water still hung in drops on his set face, while a lump of ice, which had not yet had time to melt, lay on the floor a few feet away.

With his sight quickened by the conditions, the young man noticed that the cut-glass ice-pitcher lay on the floor near the body of his father, and that a little beyond the carpet was black and soaking with water. On the body itself there were no immediately

discernible marks of violence beyond the torn collar and necktie, and that ordinary robbery had not been the motive of assault—if assault there had been—was plain from the fact that the captain's heavy gold watch-chain and watch were still on his person, and his open coat gave no evidence of his pockets having been rifled.

With each nerve in his robust body tingling, yet with a calmness for which he never could account, John raised himself and looked about. A single glance showed the young man, whose every sense had suddenly become abnormally acute, that beyond the capsized pivot-chair, the scattered papers, the open drawers, and the misplaced ice-pitcher, there was nothing about the room that indicated any unusual happening.

With a comprehensive glance he took in the picture containing the hidden paper; but, like its fellows, it had been undisturbed. He stepped to the desk. In the center of the blotting-pad lay the paper on which the captain had been writing. The pen lay across it; it, at least, had been overlooked or had not been considered worthy of violent treatment. John Wentworth picked it up and read mechanically and with little understanding:

*My Son:*

*I have determined at once to set down, in their proper order, the events that led to our conversation this evening. I write now as I know I shall not sleep until the matter*

*is off my mind. As for the paper, the meaning of which I will explain to you after you have read this, I wish to impress on you that Grace Merridale will be of age in December of this year, and I have—*

Here the writing abruptly ended, and the captain had evidently carefully put down his pen. The cause of the interruption was not clear, but the surrounding confusion partly explained it. Had the young man lifted the broad pink blotting pad he would have seen the other letter his father had been writing and had concealed just before his son's advent into the library a few hours before; and in that event he might have had his eyes suddenly opened. But for John Wentworth the time was not yet ripe.

As he read the words, the last ever written by his parent who lay dead on the floor, he let the paper fall to the pad while a sudden realization of his own calmness and unreasonable inaction took possession of him, and his passion rose and surged through him with volcanic energy. Having a fine instinct for the requirements of the law, he disturbed nothing; but with a wild glance about him, he sprang to the window, stepped to the balcony outside, and sent his voice into the night:

*“Police! Murder! Help!”*

Then in an ecstasy of action he tore from the library, and upstairs three steps at a time, to where Thomas, the butler, had his room on the top floor. The faithful old servant nearly fell out of bed at the

thunderous summons that roused him, but before he could comprehend more than the words: "The captain is murdered in the library!" Wentworth was downstairs again and at the telephone, demanding police headquarters. That done, he so far collapsed as to sink into the leather chair in the library; and when the police finally arrived, being let in by the silent Thomas, they found him staring at his father's body.

Three hours later John Wentworth and Police Inspector Barrow sat together in the closed parlor, a single gas jet in the crystal chandelier barely lighting the great room. Gray dawn was stealing through the windows and still the house seemed full of strange people who passed through the hall and up and down the front stairs. In the mixed light the young man's face had the color of ashes; he looked years older as he crouched in the depths of a Turkish chair, his white hands folded and nerveless. The official, with another chair drawn close, faced him squarely.

"You have told me you believe your father to have been murdered," remarked the policeman, after a close inspection of the face before him, and with a hard, business-like air that was anything but soothing to the jaded system of the other.

"I told you so; and you can judge the rest from appearances," was the weary answer.

"There is a well-worn adage that appearances are often deceitful," was the prompt return. "Aside

from the looks of the room, what makes you think there has been foul play?"

Wentworth unclasped his hands and passed them over his heavy eyes as if to clear his vision. "Nothing tangible, in fact," he slowly answered, as if struggling to hold his senses. "I only know my father had an enemy. He told me of it to-night; evidently a bitter enemy. It was the first I was aware of such a thing."

"Any name?"

"I did not ask him for the name."

"Any threats?"

"Not against his life, directly, but against his reputation. My father told me he was being persecuted. You saw the few lines addressed to me; he told me he would reduce all the facts to writing; he evidently went about it at once—and was interrupted by death. His statement to me had been a stunning blow."

"I presume so. And where were you to-night, sir?" The inspector fixed his hard eyes on the young man.

Wentworth met the look with the vacant stare of a sleep-walker. "I have no idea at what time I left the house," he answered. "It must have been near eleven o'clock. I had been to see a friend off on the ten o'clock train. I then came home and talked with the captain. After that I have no clear recollection of where I went, but at one o'clock I was at One Hundred and Tenth Street and Central

Park. I had been disturbed—shocked—and must have walked far. At the upper end of the park a patrolman stopped me. I gave him my card. You may verify this without trouble."

Inspector Barrow leaned back in his chair, took a cigar from his pocket and lighted it, puffing slowly. "Well, sir," he said, after a few moments' contemplation of the man before him, "you are rather too played out to talk to-night, but it may be or may not be to your satisfaction that in regard to your father we see no definite sign of foul play."

"No sign of foul play!" exclaimed the other, lifting himself from his state of semi-lethargy.

"No, sir. The doctor who has been examining the remains of Captain Wentworth reports no marks of violence on the body of the deceased—none but a slight scratch on his throat, probably made by himself as he tore away his collar in a struggle for air. You have said he was suffering from a serious heart difficulty, but that remains for the coroner to determine by autopsy; my business deals with present appearances."

"Would he tear open the drawers in his desk in a struggle for air?" asked the young man, now thoroughly aroused. "Think one moment. This house is on the corner; only a tall iron fence separates it from the side street. An athletic man—especially a desperate one—could scale it with little difficulty. The library is in the rear, the windows had been left open, and the balcony was easily accessible from

the yard. At night, when the house is closed, the windows are secured by shutters, and heavily barred on account of the exposed position. To-night they were open, as I know.

"Again. Would my father flood himself with water in one spot—you saw the carpet—then go to another part of the room and set down the ice-pitcher? If struggling for air, would he attempt extra exertion? Pull out drawers—scatter papers—carry a heavy pitcher from the stand? This thing happened immediately before I returned; the ice had not yet melted on the carpet. You have several detectives here?"

"Of course."

"Then let them look into it. I am in the dark as to all the facts, but, by Heaven! had I the name of the captain's blackmailer I think I might lay my finger on his murderer."

The inspector's face showed a new and sudden interest. "Blackmailed! For what?"

"I would to God I could tell you. I don't know. I understood that all was to be put in writing."

"And you have not the name of the man?"

"Sir, I have no idea of it nor of his whereabouts. This thing came on me like a clap of thunder."

Wentworth got to his feet as he spoke, clutching the back of the chair to steady himself. The detective eyed him coldly as he, too, got up and moved toward the door. "Well," he returned, "the matter is now up to the coroner. A man may be blackmailed,

and die during the process, but not necessarily by the hands of his blackmailer. So far as I am at present concerned the matter is simple. Of course there is a shadow of a doubt about the cause of your father's death; but whether or not it was the result of foul play—of crime—must be decided by the coroner's jury. Nothing has been missed?"

"Nothing that I can determine."

"Then, if a crime has been committed, robbery was not the motive. You see the murder theory is rather forced, young man, and perhaps fortunately for you. Had I held it, I should be obliged to arrest both you and your servant. But what do you know about your butler?"

"About Thomas? Why, I would trust him with everything—as I would have trusted my father. He came to us the year I was born—twenty-nine years ago. He loved my father—as my father loved him. He is more than a servant. As for myself, I hardly think I would contradict your theory, if I was a guilty party."

"That very fact is your best hold, my friend," returned the officer, as he laid his hand on the knob of the door. "This will be all for to-night. I shall leave men in charge of the house until the coroner arrives. Now, if you take my advice you will get yourself outside of a hooker of whiskey, and turn in. You are done up, sir, and no wonder. By to-morrow you will look at matters in a different light."

Wentworth was about to reply when a knock

sounded on the panel of the heavy mahogany door. The inspector threw it open and disclosed a young fellow standing in the hall. He was a stocky youth, with a fresh and pleasant face.

"What is it?" sharply demanded the officer.

"I would like to speak to Mr. Wentworth for a moment," was the answer.

"Who are you, sir?"

"I am from the Central Detective Bureau."

"Oh, you are! Well, you had better cork yourself until morning. I don't think Mr. Wentworth can stand anything more. You see his condition."

And it was apparent that the bereaved man had about reached his limit. Excitement, shock and lack of rest had sapped his strength. He tottered and leaned against the wall and might have fallen to the floor only that the watchful Thomas glided noiselessly past the policeman, and, putting his arm around his young master, led him away.

"You are right, Inspector," said the strange detective. "I'll wait until morning—though I would rather see him to-night." He looked after the old servant helping Wentworth upstairs.

"What's the lay, young fellow?" asked the inspector, as the two disappeared above. The other looked the official squarely in the face, and laughed.

"Do you discover any verdancy in either of my optics, sir?" he asked, opening wide his blue eyes. And with that he swung his back to the other, and walked from the house.

## CHAPTER III

### A LETTER AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

**I**T WAS three weeks later.

John Wentworth sat in his apartments in the Van Dyke studios, palette and brushes in hand, but he was not working; instead, he was gazing vacantly at the half-finished painting before him, the abstraction in his eyes showing that his thoughts were far from his surroundings.

The studio itself differed in no wise from others in its general character, save, perhaps, in that it was more luxurious than most, while it lacked the indefinite note of professionalism. There were numerous rugs on its broad floor, numerous hangings on the walls, the latter being covered with sketches and a number of really fine photographs. Books were strewn about in profusion; a large camera faced a clouded background, and near it were a number of photographic accessories.

In a corner was a rack of fencing-foils, well used, together with boxing-gloves, Indian-clubs, and the impedimenta of an athlete. There were rug-covered divans and easy-chairs, and over all an air of careless

comfort, which was not dissipated by the hard, cold light which fell from the immense but partly curtained north window.

From this studio opened two smaller rooms; one elaborately fitted as a photographic dark-room, the other recently furnished as a bedchamber. For to Wentworth had come the realization of the fleeting consciousness of immanent change which had beset him at his last interview with his father. He was now living in his studio.

The past days had been trying ones for the young man, the fact showing on his pale, drawn face. But no weakness was apparent. Under his small mustache the lines of his mouth remained firm, and his broad chin was aggressively strong; only his dark eyes and unusual pallor showed the effects of his trouble. And he was far from being satisfied. To him life had flattened out, at least temporarily, and human acumen appeared a thing to be scoffed at. For after a post-mortem examination of his father's body, and a further searching by the police of every circumstance concerning Captain Wentworth's sudden demise the jury had brought in a verdict of death from heart-disease—progressive mitral insufficiency—and not a soul was implicated, even in theory. The heart difficulty was indisputable; and though there was no explanation for the state of the library on the night of the captain's death, there was nothing definite in the minds of the jury to point to foul play. The general excite-

ment occasioned by the tragedy in high life had run its course and subsided, and the public, possibly disappointed at the lack of sensational features, was awaiting some new tragedy in some new quarter.

Had not the young man's ample fortune been independent of his father's estate he would have found himself in a serious position at this time; for, though the captain's will gave everything, without reservation, to his son, who was also sole executor of the estate, investigation soon showed that the old gentleman had but few resources left, the very mansion in which he had lived being so heavily mortgaged that there would be little equity left for the heir; and the Wentworth residence, with most of its contents, had been offered for sale, only the faithful Thomas remaining as care-taker. What furniture the young man had desired to retain was moved to the studio, together with all the pictures and bric-à-brac. Several unopened cases stood in the passage, but the painting containing the hidden paper was boxed and in John's bedroom.

He had taken it down and packed it with his own hands, but had not attempted to break open the brown paper stretched and pasted over the back; events had moved so swiftly and his mind had been so engrossed by important matters that he had scarcely thought of the red paper or of the girl to whom it belonged.

As for his father's trusteeship for Grace Merridale, Wentworth had placed the whole matter in the

hands of a lawyer who had presumably notified the lady in question and had promised to communicate with John as soon as she was located; the last not an easy matter as no address could be found more definite than that of Mason County, Texas.

And it was fairly evident that Captain Wentworth's trust had not been onerous since there was no trace of any correspondence between him and his ward, a fact perhaps explained by the smallness of the amount of property involved. In this the red paper was not included, and for some reason unrecognized by himself Wentworth said nothing about the mysterious document to his lawyer. He looked upon the delivery of the paper as aside from legal procedure; to him it was a matter of honor that he should personally place the paper in the hands of the one to whom it belonged. His father had requested it, and that was sufficient for him. Any further interest in the lady was entirely lacking, and it was only for the wish to carry out his dead parent's desire that he cared a fig for her whereabouts.

The young man had not been bored to death by condolences, spoken or written. Men of his temperament do not invite many intimates, and the world is not inclined to grieve over one who does not bid for its lamentations. In this case the bereaved seemed to have armed himself in a hard shell of reserve, and bore his trouble alone, and society considered him cold.

But he was not cold; he was only discriminant.

He cared nothing for lip-service, but he would have given much to have had his one intimate friend—his old college chum, Tom Harper, with him during his trials. Harper was a rather debonair bachelor of Wentworth's own age, and the two held similar tastes. By profession he was a mining engineer, though of slight practise, and possessor of sufficient wealth, and larger prospects, to kill ordinary ambition. The two men were usually inseparable.

It was Tom Harper for whom Wentworth was now longing, and it was not an indication of deplorable weakness in him that he wished to unburden himself to the only man in the world in whom he had perfect confidence. But Harper was on a hunting trip and could not be located. For himself, Wentworth was unused to business matters; his friend could have helped by his advice, and, more than that, by the comfort of his presence. It had been a weary time for the lonely man; the mere shock of his father's death, without the attending circumstances, would have been enough; and the trace of femininity in him, which is in all males worthy of the name of man, cried out for a sympathy that mere companions were incapable of satisfying.

Wentworth, brush in hand, came back from his wool-gathering expedition and looked around the well-filled but silent room, self-disgust written on his face; then, with an impatient shrug of his broad shoulders, he threw down his palette, speared his brushes into the vase at his side, and gave the easel a kick.

"Damn it!" he exclaimed aloud. "I can't work! I can do nothing! I have no object in life but to exist! I live on the labor of others! I am a cursed social incubus—a man without a motive."

He had barely realized that he was protesting aloud, when a knock sounded on the door, and with the privilege of his position, Thomas entered without ceremony. As regularly as the day came the old man went to the young one.

"Good-afternoon, Thomas."

"Good-afternoon, Master John. A letter and a telegram, sir." He handed out the white and the yellow envelopes, and stood, deferentially, hat in hand.

"Is that all?"

"Yes, sir. Is there anything I can do, sir?"

"No, Thomas. Anything new?"

"A gentleman called last evening, sir. He was surprised to find that—"

"Yes—yes. Go on."

"He inquired your address, sir, and said he would communicate with you at once."

"No name?"

"Yes, sir; Merridale, sir."

"Merridale! A man by the name of Merridale!" John's eyebrows contracted; the name roused a host of painful memories.

"Yes, sir. Well-put-up man, sir, about middle age. Was shocked to hear of your father."

"He left no other word?"

"No, sir."

"That will do, Thomas."

The old man bowed and looked about the disordered studio; then, moving softly, began putting it to rights.

Without seeming to notice the butler's presence, John opened the telegram, his face clearing as he read:

*Just from the woods. Learned of your awful trouble. Be with you day after to-morrow.*

*Harper.*

He laid the telegram aside and tore open the letter. The writing was in a strange, masculine hand, but the signature at the bottom of the short message caught his eye. It was the name of the man Thomas had but just told him about. The note ran thus:

*Mr. John Wentworth.*

*My very dear Sir:*

*I knew your father and loved him, even as David loved him. On my call at your late residence I was inexpressibly shocked to learn of the captain's sudden death. It is not in my nature to volunteer a formal condolence, when condolence to you would be useless, and it is not for that purpose I write. I had been expecting to hear from my old friend on a matter of business, relating to his trust for my niece, and now ask you, his*

*son, to call on me. If you can make it convenient to call on me at an early date I will esteem it a great favor.*

*I am, sir, sincerely yours,*

*Thaddeus Merridale.*

Affixed was an address in West Eighty-fourth Street.

The only unexplainable matter relating to the letter was the fact that young Wentworth was unaware that David Merridale ever had a brother. Surely the captain had never mentioned him as existing, much less as an intimate friend. Yet it was possible that an intimacy on a business basis had joined them, and that the word "love" was but a concession to the circumstance of the captain's death and his son's state of mind. That there was, or had been, a maiden sister living somewhere in Texas John had heard, but that was all. He knew none of the parties, and they had no interest for him.

But, interested or not, the name of Merridale demanded consideration, and it took no second thought to decide the young man to accede to the request of the writer of the letter. A friend of his late father could not be neglected; indeed, Wentworth looked forward to meeting the man who had stood so close to his parent. His really affectionate nature was stimulated by the prospect.

And in his present unsettled state of mind he welcomed an excuse to quit his useless work; he would go at once, and glad of having an object to

determine his movements, inconsequential as that object might be, and relieved by the prospect of Harper's early return, he put on his hat, left Thomas in the studio, and went out. Taking an elevated train, he rode up-town, and in a short time turned into West Eighty-fourth Street.

That thoroughfare, between Columbus and Amsterdam Avenues, is a solid block of flats, not of a low order, but far from being classed as high. The asphalt pavement swarmed with noisy children at play, and the canon of brick and brown stone echoed with the cries of hawkers. Wentworth found the building he was in search of, the cheap ornateness of its vestibule and the scattered remains of tradesman's circulars on the soiled tiled floor impressing him unfavorably. But there was the name of "Merridale," written in lead-pencil on a coarse card thrust into the narrow slot above a broken letter-box.

As Wentworth pressed the tarnished electric button and waited for the not over-clean glass door to open, he noticed the fact that the first and second flats were to let and untenanted. The Merridales occupied the third.

In a few moments the latch clicked, the door swung open and the young man walked up the shabby stairs and through a gloomy hall. He did not have occasion to ring at the third flat. As he reached the top step, the hall door leading to the apartment was opened by a man who took John's proffered card, stepped back into the light to read it, then came for-

ward, both hands outstretched in an effusive welcome.

"My dear sir, I am overjoyed! I did not look for such a prompt reply to my request! Come in, come in."

He led the way to the parlor. It was a meagerly furnished apartment, and John's quick eye caught the painful newness of its contents. Everything was shop-fresh, from the crimson plush sofa and chairs with the marks of the varnish brush on them, to the gaudy but cheap rug which but partly covered the stained pine floor. The papered walls were absolutely barren of pictures, and there were no ornaments on the glossy cabinet mantel of imitation rosewood. The only feature relieving the unattractive and unhomelike interior was the blue pall of cigar smoke that hung on the heavy air.

To the visitor it was quite evident that the Merridales (if there were more than one) had uncultured tastes, had but recently moved into the place, and considering the surroundings, were not cursed with an over-plusage of this world's wealth.

Beyond the parlor Wentworth caught sight of an alcove room in which was a disordered bed, several corded trunks, and an uncurtained window opening on a broad shaft. Later he had reason to remember these details.

"You will pardon the bareness and general unpreparedness of these apartments," began his host as he noticed Wentworth's comprehensive glance. The voice was smooth and well bred, the man's accent

smacking strongly of the South. "It belongs to a friend," he continued; "I have been here but a day or two and hardly looked for you so soon. I am charmed to make your distinguished acquaintance, sir." The last word was pronounced *suh*.

"No apology is necessary," returned the other, as he looked at the stocky figure before him, marking the sun-browned complexion, the sun-bleached hair, and large, slightly yellowed teeth. Merridale appeared to be between forty-five and fifty years old; nicotine had stained his small, gray mustache until its color made an excellent match for his teeth and skin, and there was something indefinable about him that checked Wentworth's previous readiness to meet him with enthusiasm.

He did not like the narrowness and furtive glance of his host's light-blue eyes, nor was he prepossessed by his fulsome manner, and too ready laugh when there had been nothing to laugh at. For himself, he never smiled without cause, and then the smile usually became a passport to good will. He waited for Merridale to lead. If this interview should be of a kind that appeared to concern his late father's business interests he would promptly refer the man to his lawyer; something about the place, or about his host who was now puffing violently on a half-consumed cigar, or both, made him anxious to finish his call and get from the house as soon as possible.

And yet he could determine no reason for this feeling, save, perhaps, that Merridale was not of his

class. He wondered how his father, whom he knew to have been the soul of prejudice, could have become intimate with a man so utterly lacking in *savoir faire*.

His host walked to the door leading into the private hall and closed it with considerable violence, even in this slight way showing his lack of gentle breeding. Evidently his smooth voice somewhat belied his character.

"You smoke?" he asked, offering a mate to the heavy cigar between his full lips.

"Thank you--not now," said Wentworth, seating himself on the hard sofa.

"No! Really, I couldn't live without it!" was Merridale's return, as he drew a chair before his guest; drew it so close that the knees of the two almost touched. "Bad habit, though! Bad for young men, but--let's get right to the point! That's my idea of business, even among friends. Eh? Ain't I right?"

Wentworth made no answer.

"I think, you being a sensible man, I won't have to detain you long," went on Merridale, without appearing to notice his visitor's lack of cordiality, and himself assuming an air of friendly confidence. "We'll jump right into the midd'e of it with both feet, as we say in Texas. You see, sir," touching Wentworth on the knee with a rather pudgy hand, "I sent for you in the interest of my niece."

Wentworth looked at him with sudden interest. "Grace Merridale?" he asked.

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"Exactly! Grace Merridale." This with a pursing of the lips which had ceased to smile, and a profound inclination of the head. "The—er—trust of your father has passed, of course! May I ask who holds the papers?"

"My lawyer."

"Doubtless! All of them?"

"All of a legal nature."

"Precisely! Really the amount is small—too small to be seriously considered by Grace, who is well-to-do in right of her mother. My poor brother was not fortunate."

"I know nothing of the amount, nor of the business, in any way," returned Wentworth. He hesitated a moment, and, as the other appeared to be cogitating he added: "By the way, sir; you say you are David Merridale's brother. I was not aware that David had a brother; certainly my father never mentioned him to me."

The smoking man took a quick glance at the speaker, then leaned forward and again touched him on the knee. His voice was somewhat lowered as he said:

"Naturally. But David was my half-brother only. His mother, a widow, married her first husband's cousin, of the same name. I am the perhaps regrettable result of their union. Then there was a family difference—a difficulty. Your father understood it. Ah, sir, your father was one man in ten thousand!" He leaned back as he uttered the last words.

Wentworth was not impressed by the platitude,

and the oily voice did not please him. The ridiculous inference that any man could be other than one in ten thousand caused him to smile slightly, a relaxation which probably encouraged his host. But the younger man now wished to terminate the interview which seemed to lead to nothing. Somehow he felt uncomfortable in his host's presence. "But you were speaking of the papers. What of them?" he asked, with the ease of bearing of one who understood himself.

"Ah, yes—the legal documents! I—er—spoke of them merely by the way; they do not interest me, being of small value. But David told me of a certain paper which he wished—which he had, or—er—was about to place in your father's hands to be given to Grace on or about her twenty-first birthday. It was to be quite outside of the legal trust, I was led to understand. Does it happen that—er—you have ever heard of it?"

"Yes," returned Wentworth, with an involuntary stiffening of his mental attitude.

"A—er—red paper? A—er—of no value except to her?"

"Yes. Do you know its nature?"

"No. Do you?"

"I do not."

"Strange, is it not?" The man laughed awkwardly, but to the astute young fellow was conveyed the idea that Mr. Merridale was pleased at his ignorance.

"Hardly strange, since I only knew of the paper's existence on the night of my father's death."

"Ah! Well, it was this pa—" He stopped abruptly, for at that moment the room door opened. John looked up.

A lady stood in the doorway—a young lady, dressed for the street. Her figure, clad in a tailor-made costume, was tall and of faultless proportions, and her face was striking—not alone from its beauty, which was great, nor from its freshness, which was palpable enough, but from a certain cold reserve. Whether the latter was natural or assumed, the young man could not guess; but he looked at her as much in surprise at her sudden and unexpected appearance as in admiration.

"I—I beg your pardon," she faltered, directing her gaze and remark to Mr. Merridale. "I—I thought you were alone. I am going out now."

The words came sweetly though the face was unsmiling, and there was a slight hesitation which was in strong contrast to her confident bearing. Merridale made no attempt to introduce the young man. His brows knitted as if the interruption had annoyed him and disturbed his temper. "I thought you had gone out long since, my dear," he said with smoothness.

Instead of answering the girl flushed as if startled by the affectionate term; but she flashed a look of utter indifference at the speaker; then with a sweeping glance at the young man on the sofa, a glance filled

with an expression of disdain, she retired, closing the door behind her.

Merridale sat back in his chair and seemed to take a long breath. "My daughter, sir," he said easily, as he relighted his extinguished cigar.

"Your daughter?"

"Yes, my daughter Ethel, Grace's cousin. She has a peculiar nature, as you may have observed. I must apologize for her briskness. She is not at all like me—not at all. It is unfortunate that the girls do not agree. They can bear little from each other."

To this Wentworth vouchsafed nothing. He had heard of women who were angels in appearance but possessed the temper of the devil.

"Now, as I was about to remark," continued the other, with an attempt at lightness of manner, "regarding the paper—the red paper—I can save you heaps of trouble, sir. I am about to return to Texas, and will place it in Grace's hands. Such a paper needs safe transit, and—well, with her, I am myself interested in it."

"You told me you were not aware of its nature," returned the young man, with an air of surprise.

"Did I? But Grace is aware of it."

"My father informed me that she has no knowledge of it. Moreover, Mr. Merridale, my father made it a point of honor, for some reason, that I should give that paper to her myself. I do not count the cost of trouble in fulfilling any wish of his."

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"Of course, you have this document?"

"Certainly. It is safe in my studio—my apartments. As soon as I can get into communication with your niece I will take the proper steps."

Merridale got up from his chair, paced the room twice, then returned and reseated himself.

"But, Mr. Wentworth," he said with an accession of soft-voiced confidence, "my niece has assigned her interests in that paper to me."

"Then she is at liberty to give it to you with her own hands. I will not."

"You will not?"

"I will not."

"You make that statement as final?"

"As final; yes, sir."

"Then, Mr. Wentworth, permit me to inform you that you are depriving me of my rights." The voice was a trifle harsh, and the hitherto ready smile disappeared. "Time, in this matter, is important to me. Can I make it an object to you to alter your mind?"

"You mean that you would bribe me?"

The other laughed harshly, and waved a pudgy hand.

"You might be a trifle more euphemistic—but I suppose, between us—as men, you know—we might come to an understanding."

John's heart began to beat violently. "What is your figure?" he inquired calmly, though his nerves had become tense.

"Well, sir, I happen to be aware that you have come somewhat short in your expectations from your father. Let us say, one thousand dollars. That is liberal. You are not responsible to any one in this; you would not be remiss in any legal requirement."

"In no legal requirement, true; but I shall consider my father's wish, even if it necessitates a trip to Texas. The latter would not be unpleasant. It is my honor which is involved."

"Your honor! Why, my dear sir—my dear sir, I have—"

Wentworth's face grew hot. "No, sir," he interrupted. "I anticipate what you would argue! It is useless! You have proposed a transaction which is insulting in itself, which is repugnant, and which I refuse utterly."

The other looked at him steadily, then began pacing the floor. His face bore an ugly frown, though his voice was not aggressive.

"Mr. Wentworth," he said, flicking the ash from his cigar, "there is a man—I know him well—who once told me a story relating to your father—a story that would blast his reputation, were it known. May I be plain?"

"The plainer the better, sir," said Wentworth, but with that in his voice which should have warned the other.

"Well, it would have placed him in the grip of the law." He stopped, glancing at his seated guest from

the corner of his eye as he coolly wet and rewound the loose end of his ragged cigar.

Wentworth felt all the blood in his body rising to his head, but he made no movement of surprise as he got a grip on himself and said: "Yes? And the nature of the crime? I have heard something of it, but nothing definite."

Merridale did not answer the direct question, but went on with exasperating coolness: "Such a story would not be relished by any man of your caste, sir, though the hungry public would find it entertaining."

"And the nature of it?" repeated Wentworth, leaning forward and raising his voice.

"You wish it given explicitly?"

"Explicitly."

"Well, sir, it is nothing less than the greatest of crimes coupled with the meanest. I mean murder and robbery, if you insist upon having the truth."

If Wentworth had been struck in the face by the man before him he could hardly have been more stunned. Murder! His father charged with murder! The idea was too preposterous. And robbery! Captain Wentworth, the soul of honor, a thief! The young man stared at Merridale, less stirred by the charge than by the temerity of the person who had made it. He now saw, or thought he saw, the character of the individual who had traduced the memory of his dead parent. He suddenly hated the fellow, but he was too well poised to break into a tirade of

denunciation. He got a firm hold on himself and rose to his feet.

"And you, sir; do you really believe it?" he asked, speaking with dangerous calmness.

"That is neither here nor there," said Merridale, with the air of a man who sees and is ready to push what he thinks is an advantage. "But I assure you, sir, that once I am in possession of the paper in question, the man would be forever silent."

"What is his name? Where can he be found?"

The Southerner's heavy face lighted. "I will not tell you his whereabouts, Mr. Wentworth; that would be too much like crowding the mourners; but if you wish to come to terms with me I am willing to tell you his name. It is Welch. Did you ever hear of him?"

"No. And so through him you would attempt to blackmail me even as he blackmailed my father."

"You are speaking rather too plainly; but I will say that in the event of your refusal to give up the paper I will no longer hold him to silence, as I have been doing. The thing is useless to you—you could not even read it; and now that the captain is dead Welch alone has the key."

Wentworth's blood was boiling with anger. It was all he could do to keep his hands from the now grinning man who faced him and who seemed to be unaware of his own lack of skill in playing his hand.

"You now say Welch alone has the key. But a

few moments since you told me that Grace Merridale was aware of the contents of that paper."

"I told you nothing of the kind," retorted Merridale, his face flushing darkly as he realized his break.

"I say you did. You have trapped yourself."

"You are a liar, sir. I did not."

That was the climax. Wentworth forgot himself. The policy he had formed of drawing this man on until he could learn something definite was lost sight of at the epithet and in his sudden whirl of passion. He took a step toward Merridale. "You are a villain!" he shouted, "mated with another villain!" And with that he shot out his right fist.

It did not take Merridale entirely off his guard. He had quickly lifted his arm to protect himself and the blow caught his hand as it reached the level of his chin. Wentworth's fist fell there but its force was deadened by the fat fingers of the other. The fellow staggered back under the power of the impact, caught his legs in a chair, and rolled to the floor.

For a moment he was dazed; then he got to his feet with an oath; but as John advanced, he ran to the door and into the hall, bringing the door to behind him with a slam. There was a sound of a clicking lock, the meaning of which Wentworth was too excited to realize; then all was quiet.

The thoroughly angered young man stood waiting for Merridale's return; but as the minutes slipped by, he went to the door only to discover that it was locked from the outside and was firm. It was not

a heavy door, as doors go; but it was sufficient to bar his way from the house. He sat down and tried to calm himself, a thing he finally succeeded in doing, for, unthought of by him, time flew along, and he suffered no interruption. He did not consider the possible consequences of his assault, nor could he, try as he might, trace backward the sequence of events till he came to their source.

He was entirely satisfied that his host was no better than Welch, and he was now doubly sure that, come what might, neither should have the red paper unless it passed through the hands of Grace Merridale. To this he pledged his honor anew. As for Welch—he would now make it his business to find him, and find exactly of what his father was accused. He knew that the captain had commenced his career on the sea, and it was possible that in the wilder days of his youth he might have been guilty of something which, for blackmailing purposes, had been construed into major crimes.

But it could have been neither murder nor robbery! The thing was impossible! And yet, as the young man sat alone, he was fearful of what might be uncovered, and this, too, with no lack of loyalty to the memory of his dead parent.

His train of thought was long and deep. When he roused himself, he became aware that the daylight was on the wane—that it had already grown dusk—that he was alone, and had been undisturbed for something like two hours. He got up with a start and looked

from the window. The street was still filled with shouting children, and lights were beginning to twinkle from the houses opposite. He saw at once that to attempt to attract outside attention would not only be difficult, but that its success would result in gathering a mob.

He again walked to the door. It was still fast. For a time he tried to pick the lock with his knife, but soon saw that nothing short of smashing it would free him. Then a thought struck him. Perhaps Merridale had succumbed to the force of his blow and was lying helpless somewhere. He hammered and kicked on the panels, but without effect; the two flats below him, he now remembered, were not occupied.

It had by this grown to be deep gloom in the room, and the feeling that he was a prisoner rendered him desperate. He took one turn about the apartment to steady his thoughts; then, picking up the heaviest chair, he swung it aloft and brought it down on the door close to the knob.

Under the force of the blow the chair went to pieces in his grasp, and the panel flew to splinters. Reaching his hand through the ragged opening, the young man felt the key in the lock, and turned it. The door swung open. Only the darkness of the private hall met his gaze. Striking a match, he moved along the hall until he found a gas-bracket, which he lighted; then he explored the flat, illuminating each room until the place was ablaze with

light. But his hope, or fear, of finding the man he had struck was groundless; save for himself, the flat was empty. He was as much a prisoner as ever.

A slight examination showed him that the door leading to the outer hall was fastened from the outside, or locked and the key taken away; he also noticed that the panels were stout and heavy, and, moreover, the private hall at that point was so narrow as to preclude the possibility of swinging a chair with any effect. Without proper tools, he could not get out; he must look for some other mode of obtaining his liberty.

He thought of the fire-escape. Looking from the window of what was intended for the dining-room, now a bare, unfurnished apartment, he saw that egress to the iron ladder was through the kitchen window, and he then found that the kitchen was being used as a store-room only, it being piled ceiling-high with furniture, trunks, and packing-boxes. It presented a mass which would have taken two strong men a couple of hours to remove. It was now fairly plain to the young man that the flat was being used for sleeping purposes only, unless, indeed, it was but a trap; escape by the fire-ladder was impossible.

Suddenly a thought struck him—a thought that sent a wave of fever through his veins. Had Merri-dale deliberately locked him in that he might go to the studio and ransack it for the paper? Such a man might be equal to such an act.

Wentworth's sudden emotion did not rise from any fear for the loss of the paper; it was too well hidden for that, but the possibility of so high-handed a proceeding made him desperately anxious to get out of the flat; indeed, the matter was imperative; he was a prisoner, an unlawful prisoner, and any course that freed him would be justified. He next thought of sliding down the dumb-waiter rope, but a glance into the narrow black hole dissuaded him, not only from its repellent aspect, but because he realized he could not escape that way—the waiter, being at the bottom, would itself block the entrance to the basement.

As he drew back from the dumb-waiter shaft his mind reverted to the corded trunks and the air-well by the alcove window. Hurrying into that room he examined the ropes to determine their strength, and was surprised to find that he had never seen the like of such lines, nor was he aware that he was wasting his time in questioning the strength of a regular Texas cattle lariat. He saw that if one was not sufficient, two would more than hold his one hundred and sixty-seven pounds. He would go down the air-well, if they were long enough.

He looked from the window. It was now fairly dark outside, but sufficient light came from the sky to show the small, paved court and cellar windows some thirty odd feet below. That distance would be a mere bagatelle for him.

With nervous haste he unknotted the lines from

the two trunks, fastened the ends together, tied the doubled cord to the leg of the bed, which he pushed close to the window, and then threw out the coil. The line reached to within eight or ten feet of the pavement.

He ran to the room which had undoubtedly been occupied by the young lady; he had seen some towels there. Save for a bed, bureau, a chair, and an open trunk, the little room was bare.

There was a delicate perfume on the air, a perfume suggesting femininity; the odor was a strange one, though even then it impressed him.

Taking the towels, he went round and extinguished all the gas in the flat, returning to the alcove.

Stripping off his coat, he threw it to the court below; then, winding the towels round his hands, he took a firm grasp on the double lines and swung himself from the window.

## CHAPTER IV

### TOM HARPER

THE windows of the adjoining flats were at the extreme end of the air-shaft, and no one saw the young man, as, for a moment or two, he hung twisting in space. Getting a grip on the line with his legs, he loosened his hold and let himself slide slowly, but not so slowly but that he felt the heat of the friction and knew the towels were being eaten away. By the time his legs felt the end of the line the burning of his hands became unbearable, and he let go his grasp, falling some ten feet, yet alighting with less of a shock than he anticipated.

He leaned against the wall to catch his breath after his exertion, then put on his coat and looked at the window in front of which he had fallen. It was a dingy, unwashed sash, and there was no light behind it; he knew, however, it must open into the cellar, and without ado he kicked it in.

The crashing of glass evidently disturbed some one above, for a voice called out; but without answering Wentworth crawled through the jagged hole he

had made and found himself free, for the door to the street was directly before him. In a moment he was out of it, and in ten minutes more was on an elevated train.

As he reviewed the events of the afternoon, and his mind was completely taken up by them, he realized that, though he had come out of an awkward situation as a victor, he should not let the matter rest. Not only was he determined to find Welch and clear away the mystery hanging over his late father's good name, but he made up his mind that Thaddeus Merridale should be made to suffer for the outrage put upon him; indeed, he must see the man again if only for the purpose of tracing Welch.

But, like a wise physician who puts his own case into the hands of a brother professional, Wentworth determined not to take further steps until he had the advice of Harper, whom he knew he would soon see. That astute individual, though somewhat lazy when acting in his own behalf, was keen enough when acting for another, was intensely practical, logical and cool-headed, and his counsel would be wise. Wentworth knew that the police might be appealed to in this matter; but as he had as yet suffered nothing beyond inconvenience, and as the arrest of Merridale for unlawfully detaining him in a locked room might at the same time open the flood-gate of scandal, he put aside the idea.

That the man who had attempted to bribe and then blackmail him would proceed further in

his efforts to obtain the red paper the young man could not conceive. He considered that Merridale had received a lesson he would not soon forget, and it would be but a question of time before he would read him another. In this he was both wrong and right.

When he arrived in front of the Van Dyke he found Thomas walking up and down the pavement in the dusk. As the old man saw his master he gave a sigh of relief, and the expression of trouble went from his face.

"I was getting to be afraid something wrong had happened to you, sir. I did not want to leave until you returned, Master John," said the faithful servitor.

"Something has happened," said Wentworth.

"I hope nothing serious, Master John—nothing connected with what I have done. I acted for what I thought was the best, sir."

"What do you mean? Has any one been here to see me?"

"Yes, sir; two gentlemen, sir; the one who called at the house last night, and another with him, sir—a foreign-looking chap. They showed me your order, sir, but I couldn't help them."

"Order! What order?"

"The note you wrote, sir, about a certain red paper. I know nothing of it, Master John, and so told them. They wanted to search the place, sir—said it was important—that you sent them for it and were waiting."

"And did you let them, Thomas?"

"No, sir. I met them in the hall just after I had locked the door. The young foreign fellow threatened me, sir, but they went away later."

Wentworth whistled softly. "And that was all?" he asked, as the evident desperation of Merridale was set forth in plain lines.

"Yes, sir. But they offered me ten dollars to let them in. It looked too irregular, sir; I refused. They turned ugly at that—especially the older man—and I thought they might try to get the key from me by force, for the hall was empty and the elevator had stopped running, so I came down to the street. Later, they came down after me and stood on the corner talking—then they walked off."

"How long ago was this?"

"They've been gone about an hour, sir—perhaps more."

"You did right, Thomas," said the young man, flaming with anger. "I gave no order. That man—! Never mind. You may go now; I'll attend to those fellows! One was a foreigner you say?"

"Yes, sir. Slight man, sir; very dark, long hair, small mustache and goatee. The two talked together in a foreign language; Spanish, I think it was, sir."

"Very good, Thomas. You did your duty thoroughly. Here—take this and—good-night."

He thrust a bill into the hand of the old man and left him.

"I wonder who the devil the foreigner is and

what he has to do with this muss," mused Wentworth as he climbed the stairs to his studio. "This matter is getting beyond me," he muttered, as he let himself into the studio. "I wish Harper were here now."

When he had put himself in order he went out and had his dinner, his mind completely obsessed by the red paper around which so much appeared to revolve. He considered it high time that he learned something definite about the mysterious document in which his father had taken so great an interest and for which Thaddeus Merridale was willing to commit a crime. What was it that could have so influenced a man like his father, aroused the desperation of two strangers, and now was a threat to himself? He resolved to find out at once.

His dinner finished, he hurried back to his room, locking and bolting the door, then fished the boxed picture from beneath the bed, pried off the cover of the case and lifted out the painting. Under the blade of his knife the stretched paper backing gave way with the resonant sound of tightened parchment, and as Wentworth folded back the flap he saw a long blue envelope on which was written:

*GRACE MERRIDALE*

*To be delivered to her  
on her twenty-first  
birthday.*

*December 17th,*

*19—.*

The writing was in Captain Wentworth's hand--his hand had placed it in this hiding-place, and he had spoken of the document as a curse.

With a reverent touch the young man took out the envelope. It was unsealed. From it he drew a single sheet of white paper—white on one side, folded thrice to fit the envelope. He opened it.

Here at last was the enigma.

Indeed, his father had been right; he could make absolutely nothing of it, and his first thought was of the impossibility of men getting into a passion over such a thing. It was a sheet of exactly eight by ten inches, and to the young man's eye was covered with only a fine but irregular network of lines done with a fine pen dipped in red ink. The surface of the paper was entirely covered, save for a slight edging of white, and the only thing that broke the bewildering maze was a faint bluish cloud, without form or outline, darker in some areas than in others, as though the paper had been soiled.

Wentworth took up a focusing-glass and carefully went over every inch of the strange document—if document it could be called—but even under the increase of power he could make nothing of it, save that the blue smudge became more definite in outline, though it was still without meaning.

Viewed from a distance of three feet, the smudge was not discernible at all, and the fine red lines merged together so that, to all appearances, it was a mere piece of plain, carmine-colored paper, some-

what soiled, and worthy of the trash-basket. Thinking its secret might be solved by looking through it Wentworth held it up to the strong argand-burner, but the paper was almost absolutely opaque.

And yet, he was perfectly sure that before him lay something of great value. He grew feverish and smoked cigarette after cigarette as he worked over what he had considered would be a simple problem; but he could come to no satisfactory conclusion regarding its nature. He thought bitterly that if his father had lived a day longer, he would have known the secret; but now the only thing remaining was to fulfil his father's wish and deliver the meaningless paper to the young lady in question, as soon as he could come by her whereabouts.

"And a valuable asset it is likely to prove to her!" he murmured scornfully; "for, according to my father, she knows no more of its meaning than I do. Why in the devil does Merridale go to such a length to get it? With a pen, a bottle of carmine ink and a couple of hours of patience I could duplicate the thing, in appearance! But there is evidently more in it than meets the eye, and—to the devil with it! It's getting on my nerves! Merridale shall not have it, priceless or worthless, and the whereabouts of the man Welch hits my interest harder than this does! I wish I had my hands on him! Curse the thing! I'm going out!"

He returned the paper to the painting, put the painting in its box and shoved it under his bed;

then he left the studio and went over to the Great White Way in time to meet the multitudes streaming from the theaters. In the teeming crowds the young man was as lonesome as if in the desert and in a spirit of self-disgust he returned to his rooms, now having shaken off the bother of the mysterious paper but not the dissatisfaction that made him chafe at an existing order of things which seemed to place him beyond the pale of productive work.

His one idea was to find Welch, and with a natural impatience to begin the search he chafed under the restraint of circumstances. After walking the floor for an hour he went to bed and slept the sleep of the young, the healthy and the clean of conscience.

When, the next morning, in his dressing-gown and mule-slippers, he shuffled from his bedroom into the broad light of the studio, he saw a man lying on the divan, sound asleep. After the events of the day before the sight caused him a shock and he was about to tackle the recumbent figure when the sleeper turned over and exposed his identity. It was Tom Harper.

Wentworth's cry roused him, and the next moment the two had gripped each other's hands and looked into each other's faces. There was no demonstration of excessive joy, but there was a consciousness which went deeper. For a minute or two they did not speak. Finally, Harper broke the silence:

"I didn't expect to get in here until to-morrow, Jack! Arrived at the Grand Central at four this

morning and had been unable to get a sleeper. Left my kit at the express office and came right here to have a nap—you know the governor and how crotchety he is about being disturbed before regular hours. I let myself in with the key you gave me, and had the start of my life when I saw you in bed. I didn't know you were living here—and you looked so blissfully happy that I thought it a sin to wake you. I—I have nothing to say—that you haven't felt. I would like the details when you feel you can give them."

"I have plenty to interest you," said Wentworth, "perhaps to stagger your belief. I want your advice—and help. Go and wash up; you look like a coal-heaver. You are well?"

"Of course. Fit for anything, from a fight to a football match. And you?"

"Equally, of course—barring worry and trouble. I have had my fight within twelve hours, and it may be that worse than a football match is coming. I want the help of your massive brain, old man."

"What's up?" asked Harper, stretching and shaking his big figure as he threw off his lethargy.

"Enough is up—up in the air. Wait until we are dressed. Take a tub—you'll find all the conveniences. I'll be ready for you in a jiffy. Then for breakfast; after that, business."

"A fight, is it?" said the other. "You don't look truculent, Jack, only a little thinner and paler. However, fight or arbitrate, I'm with you." The

big man held out his hand and shrugged his broad shoulders. The two gripped in silence; one in faith, the other in blind confidence, and both in that spirit of sympathy and understanding which binds some men together in bonds stronger than those of blood.

Two hours later, well-groomed and fed, the friends were again in the studio. Wentworth walking up and down the rugged floor as he talked, while Harper, pipe in mouth, lolled on the divan, active interest showing on his wholesome, clean-shaven face.

From the moment they had parted some weeks before Wentworth gave the history of every hour that had elapsed. It had been a long, hard story. "And now you have the last detail," he said, throwing away his exhausted cigar and flinging himself into an easy-chair. "It is not a very happy tale to welcome you with. I am at sea about the captain—and must always be, I suppose; and I am at sea regarding Merridale and Welch. But the next move is up to me. What is to be done?"

Harper refilled his pipe. "I should say that the first thing is to let me have a look at that wonderful red paper; the rest can wait a while," was the quiet return. "You know the adage concerning two heads —though neither of us bears that of an ass, I take it."

Wentworth went to the bedroom and brought out the box, opened it and gave the paper to his friend. Harper turned it over and over in his great hands, looking at it from every point of view.

"Humph!" he finally ejaculated. "That is the blindest lead I ever struck. Looks like the fly-leaf or binding of a fancy book, and a dirty one, at that! Why in the deuce should any man want to risk a fight or a term in jail for this thing?"

"It is supposed to be valuable."

"Well, it don't look it; but as—as the captain said it was I must believe it. Valuable for what? It certainly is not clear on the face of it! And why should your father have taken it from the vault? Why should he have considered it a temptation, and—well, no matter, Jack. I'm a bit fagged from lack of rest. I'd like to sleep on the subject before I express an opinion—which is vague—at best. But, if this paper is valuable, do you know what I'd do?"

"What?"

"Photograph it—just for a record, you know. You are an expert and have everything handy. Suppose the lady should lose it; she would like a copy. I'd photograph it at once."

"I hadn't thought of such a thing; but it's a good idea."

"Do it now, old man."

"Will you wait?"

"Yes, for a while. I should be getting home; but you make the exposure—you needn't develop it at once—then we'll take a Turkish bath, after which perhaps my brain will work and I can consider the matter of Welch *et al.*"

Harper yawned prodigiously as he finished. Went-

worth looked fixedly at him. "Tom, you are afraid of Merridale!"

"I am not afraid of Merridale," returned the other, bringing his strong jaws together with a snap, "but I confess to a fear of what such a man is capable of doing; not to you, perhaps, but to Miss Merridale. If you get a good negative you will protect her and not have to be nervous about the original. Lord, how bunged up I feel! Get to work, old man."

Wentworth turned away and Harper threw himself on to the broad divan, where he went instantly to sleep.

## CHAPTER V

### THE RED PAPER

THE other wheeled an easel into the broad light and tacked the paper on a blank canvas, then brought up his camera and focused carefully. The ground glass of the fine instrument was larger than the paper itself, making it possible to get a copy the exact size of the original—a thing the young man determined to do. It took some minutes to align the image on the glass, bringing out the fine lines on the screen, but that done to his satisfaction he went for a plate-holder, placed it in the camera, closed the pneumatic shutter, drew the slide and was about to make the exposure when he thought a moment and held his hand.

"I must have the blue smudge and all," he murmured to himself, glancing at his sleeping friend, who, he knew, would criticise the lack of it. "And I won't get it this way. It needs a ray filter and an orthochromatic plate."

He put back the slide and pulled out the holder, exchanging it for one containing a color-sensitive plate, then going to a leather case on a shelf, he selected

from it a red-glass cell. Unscrewing the lens, he dropped the cell in its groove in the camera and replaced the lens. This, while it darkened the image and would quadruple the exposure, would give orthochromatic values to the negative; but now the image required refocusing.

Not for a second did Wentworth dream of the importance of the change he had made, nor what was hanging on the moment. Had it not been for the well-known critical mental attitude of the sleeping man he would have let the matter go in a plain photograph; but now he determined to do his best and maintain his reputation as an expert amateur. He picked up the magnifying glass, threw the black-velvet focusing cloth over his head, and for an instant stood looking at the image on the ground glass, not a sound being heard but the dull rumble from the avenue and the heavy breathing of Harper.

What he saw puzzled him. The image of the blank red paper was no longer there as it had been; in fact, it was not there at all, and something else seemed to have taken its place. He brought his head from beneath the focusing cloth and looked at the easel, but it was there, just as he had placed it, red paper and all. He dived under the cloth again, and was still for half a minute, then the black velvet was tossed into the air and the studio rang with a shout that brought Harper bolt upright.

"Eureka! I have found it!" cried Wentworth, his eyes shining.

"Found what?" asked Harper in idiotic bewilderment as he tried to gather his scattered senses.

"The paper! The secret! The key! Look! Get your head under the cloth and look!"

He was incoherent from excitement.

But Harper comprehended. He rubbed his eyes and went to the camera, throwing the cloth over his head. In a moment he sprang back with an exclamation.

"By George! I see the thing! Have you a pane of red glass—red anything that is transparent?"

"Yes; the dark-room lantern."

"Fetch it out. Hurry! You've got the deadwood of the matter, and now we'll cinch it. Don't you see? The red filter back of the lens has washed out the red lines that led the eye astray. The red, uniting with the blue smudge we thought was dirt, has turned that black. The thing is plain. The paper is a disguised map! Bring on the glass."

It was clear that Harper was right, for when the paper was laid on the table and the sheet of ruby glass placed over it, the character of the hitherto meaningless scrap stood out strongly.

It was a map of some kind; both men, with their heads together, saw that at once. The faint blue smudge was now dark, and appeared like black ink on a dark-red ground, and below, where the dirt had appeared the thickest the matter fell into writing.

Harper picked up the magnifying glass and scanned it closely while Wentworth drew back and watched

his face. The young man's excitement was over; he had discovered the meaning of the paper and it satisfied him. There was silence for a few moments as Harper studied the paper, and when at last the engineer put down the glass and, turning, looked up at his friend, his usually ruddy face had paled somewhat. He drew a deep breath, but his voice was controlled and even as he said:

"No wonder Merridale was willing to go to great lengths for this! No wonder your father said this paper was of incalculable value! Old man, do you know what that thing is?"

"No; but by your manner it is something out of the common."

"Indeed, it is! It is a map—evidently a true one—of the lost San Saba mine in Texas, and underneath in writing is a full description of its bearings!"

"The finder must have been a navigator, for he has plotted the latitude and longitude to the second, and given directions for approaching as though he was charting an island at sea, and furnishing sailing directions. Did you ever hear of the lost San Saba mine?"

"No."

"Well, I have. I heard much of it while I was in Texas and getting my professional legs under me. I should say that hundreds of men have lost their lives looking for that mine. At one time I caught the bug and thought of taking a whack at it myself. This was seven years ago—and I was just that

caliber of a fool—but my governor vetoed my plan of exploration. Now I don't blame him."

"I well remember of your going to Texas," said Wentworth, "but, excuse me, Tom; a mine is a hole in the ground, I think, and how in the devil can a hole in the ground be lost? Real estate is not perambulent to any great degree. If it was, and was valuable, someone would be likely to rope it before it got far."

"This is no joke, old man," was the serious return. "The mine in question has always been known as the San Saba. We have an idea of its location, but there is nothing definite; hardly more than that it lies to the northern part of what was once Tom Greene County. Tom Greene County has been split up since my day, but as it was originally somewhat larger than the State of Massachusetts, and as the entire country about is a howling desert, unwatered, unwooded and mountainous, this localizing the mine is anything but satisfactory; the knowledge of its whereabouts has been mighty vague."

"But if once found and worked, how could it become lost?"

"I can tell you that. Rich ore was taken from it as late as 1840—silver ore, with a big sprinkling of gold. Of course, the mining methods were crude. You know something of the history of Texas. Between her struggle for independence from Mexico, the rough element in the State, and the looming up of the Mexican War, mining had no chance. The

times were raw. The mines were raided by the Texans, and the workers, mostly Mexicans, were driven out or killed.

"No doubt many a man had his eye on the spot waiting for times of peace, but every one went into action in that period, and for a while the place was deserted. It is not a country in which a man may linger long without supplies from the outside, and in those days supplies were impossible. In itself the country supports nothing but cactus, greasewood, tarantulas, and rattlesnakes; it is a maze of shifting sand-dunes, and lifts of rock. It did not take many years, or even months, for every sign of mine and human occupation to be obliterated. The hand of the sand-storm did the work—filled in every excavation and leveled every adobe hut—in fact, ground everything to powder, save the solid rock, and these storms will eventually cut down and level even the porphyry of the hills. A sand-storm is relentless, and Tom Greene County is the playground for them."

"The heat is hellish and the land arid. Once the trace of human work was lost the mine was lost—filled up—and the probability is that every man who has laid eyes on it is now dead."

"Well?"

"Well, the maker of this map has been able, by hook or by crook, by accident or reasoning, to relocate the lost San Saba. No richer mine ever existed—if tradition is true. Knowing its worth, he disguised this map; giving the key, or telling it to your father,

with the promise that it be made over to his daughter Grace. That much seems clear to me. But, somehow, this fellow catches on to the secret—how, I can't guess. He goes to your father, who has the paper, and—pardon me, old man, you know the rest. You have struck the key by accident, and if Grace Merridale wishes to sell this map she can be one of the richest young ladies in the United States."

"But Merridale?"

"Evidently he also is in the secret and has tried to do with you what Welch tried to do with your father—while either or both are ready to rob the lady."

"But she shall have it—to do what she pleases with it," said Wentworth.

"Of course," returned Harper, knitting his brows.  
"Unless—unless—"

"Unless what?"

Harper got to his feet; his face was very serious as he laid his pointed finger on Wentworth's chest as though to accentuate his words:

"Unless Merridale, Welch *et al.*, severally or together, take it into their heads to commit another crime."

"Another crime! Then you think with me that the captain was murdered!"

"Murdered? In the sight of the law—no; in the sight of Heaven—yes. But, old man, that subject is too painful for you to discuss at present. However, get that paper under lock and key at once;

raise heaven and earth to find Grace Merridale, and get it off your hands. Beware of Merridale *et al.* I'm going home. I'm fagged. I've got to sleep. I'll see you to-morrow and we'll talk some more. So long, old man!"

Harper went out, and somehow Wentworth felt as if the light had gone with him; he had a feeling of having bid him good-bye for an indefinite time. "Damn it!" he said to himself as he looked around the silent studio. "I believe I am getting to be an old woman!"

## CHAPTER VI

### GRACE MERRIDALE

THE mood to work was not on him, and instead of attempting to go on with the half-finished landscape which had engaged his attention he sat down at the table and with his focusing glass studied the red paper through the sheet of ruby glass laid over it. But the wording of the map was so filled with the technicalities of navigation that he could make little of it. An arrow marked what was evidently the beginning of a trail, and under it was written:

“OLD FORT CONCHO  
125 miles,”

while the line of the trail twisted in a bewildering manner, marked here and there with marginal figures.

Wentworth became interested in tracing out the line, and, considering the wide possibilities open to the girl when in possession of the map, so interested, indeed, that he forgot for the moment the advisability of continuing his work of photographing it, and so engrossed had he become that he failed to hear the light tap on his studio door. The tap was re-

peated several times before he awoke to the fact that some one desired admittance.

Drawing a newspaper over both plan and glass, he went to the door, expecting to see Thomas and wondering why the old man had not entered at his call. But it was not Thomas; instead, in the hall stood a young lady, and with a glance Wentworth recognized the girl he had seen in Merridale's flat the day before. In the face of what had happened there he so closely associated her with Merridale himself that he looked quickly up and down the long hall, thinking that as a matter of course her father was with her, but she appeared to be alone.

In his surprise at seeing her the young man gave the lady no word of welcome, nor did he have the common courtesy of speaking at all, nor was it until he was sure she was unattended that he took a second look at her.

Unlike her manner on the day before, there was now no repellent haughtiness in the lady's bearing or expression. Instead, she appeared to shrink at sight of the man before her. Her cheeks were flushed and her red lips half-open as though she were breathless from haste or embarrassment. As she, in turn, recognized Wentworth her dark blue eyes opened wide in astonishment and her beauty was accentuated as the color deepened in her face.

"I—I thought to see Mr. Wentworth, sir," she stammered, in palpable confusion.

"Yes? I am Mr. Wentworth," returned the young

man, with a slight bow but without relaxing his suspicion as to the lady's motive in calling on him. "If I am not mistaken this is Miss Merridale."

"Yes, but I did not know that you—I saw you yesterday with—him." There was a slight emphasis on the final pronoun.

"I have a vivid recollection of being at your apartments," returned Wentworth, with a trace of sarcasm in his answer. He thought the girl would understand. Then realizing the fact that both still stood in the public hall and that it might be policy to know her business and perhaps through her obtain a knowledge of the whereabouts of Welch—at all events, show ordinary decency to his caller, he added: "Won't you come in?"

He turned and led the way into the studio, the girl following hesitatingly. At the man's invitation she seated herself but he did not take his place at her side. All his armor was on; he would teach this evident emissary from an unprincipled ruffian that he was wide awake and proof against such as she. There should be no siren act for him.

"Well, madam, what can I do for you?"

The girl gave a fleeting glance at the finely proportioned figure standing before her, then her eyes fell to her clasped hands. "I have made a mistake, somehow," she said. "I—I did not dream you knew him! I went to your late residence and was given this address. I—I did not expect to see you! Please—please do not tell him I have been here—

or have seen you since yesterday. I am afraid—”

“Afraid of what?”

“Of—him.” Again an emphasis on the pronoun referring to Merridale. The young lady plainly was ill at ease—or acting superbly.

“I cannot account for your evident surprise at seeing me either at the flat or here,” said Wentworth, “neither can I pretend to account for your fear. I had never seen your father. I called on him at his written request, not on my own initiative, and—”

“My father!”

“Yes; you saw me there. If I have wounded your feelings by—”

He stopped. The young lady, who had seated herself on the edge of the divan, came slowly to her feet, her great eyes opening in something like consternation.

“Did he tell you he was my father?” she asked, leaning forward.

“Yes, after you came in and went out. He spoke of you as his daughter, and, pardon me, of your disagreement with your cousin, Grace. I am interested in learning of your cousin. I have something for her. I er—forget to press the question of her whereabouts with your father.”

The girl sank back on the divan, and for a moment buried her face in her gloved hands. But it was only for a moment; presently she looked up at the young man, who stood over her.

"I am Grace Merridale, Mr. Wentworth—if, indeed, you are Mr. Wentworth. When I saw you there I thought you were one of them, or one with them. I am happy to believe I was wrong! I am glad I came, if only to undeceive you. That man is not my father; I am sorry to say he is my uncle—but by marriage only."

"Not your father's brother?"

"No. He married my father's maiden sister—my aunt—ten years ago. She is dead. His name is Bagshot."

"You, Grace Merridale!" exclaimed Wentworth, in astonishment. "And his name is Bagshot? Then he has been masquerading! At the risk of offending you, madam, I wish to denounce him as a villain; and if, indeed, you are Grace Merridale, the daughter of my father's old friend, I am at a loss to account for your being in company with such a character."

The man's voice was hard and uncompromising. The lady looked up at him now with an air of perplexity. "Perhaps," continued Wentworth, "perhaps he has sent you for a certain red paper which, as Grace Merridale, will soon be yours for the asking."

That his visitor was not without spirit was plain as she quickly caught the undisguised hostility of Wentworth's attitude.

"Excuse me, sir," she returned, with an access of haughtiness. "With you, I am equally at a loss. I know nothing of a paper of any color—certainly not of that to which you refer. Nor do I recognize

your right to either criticise or catechise me. I am Grace Merridale. I came here less in regard to any interest of mine than in the interest of the son of my father's oldest and best friend. And I came at some risk to myself—should my errand be known—to warn you."

In a twinkling Wentworth's attitude, mental and physical, changed.

"You came to warn me! Against what?"

"Against him—my uncle—and Joe Planet. I overheard them talking about you last night, and—"

"One moment, please," interrupted the man. "First, tell me; do you know what happened yesterday—in the flat—while you were away?"

"No. I did not get home until after six, and—"

"Then we are evidently at cross-purposes. Let me set you right as to my position." And Wentworth took from the table the letter he had received, placed it in the girl's hands and seated himself on the end of the divan.

The young lady read the note hurriedly.

"There is no such person in the world as Thaddeus Merridale;" she said quickly, as she finished. "What did he wish?"

"He wished that which is yours, and yours alone; he demanded that which I have been saving for you; that which will make its possessor rich. I have it here, and have just discovered its character."

"I—I do not think I understand," was the reply, and the tone of the girl's voice was softened by wonder.

"I presume not. I would make but a blundering diplomat, I fear," said Wentworth. "I had no intention of offending you." And here he launched into the story of the red paper, beginning where his father had told him of it, and ending with the adventure of the day before. Ere he was half through his visitor had altered her repellent attitude. Her beautiful eyes shone with excitement or turned soft as the story progressed; her bosom heaved, her color came and went, and to Wentworth, who grew eloquent under the flattery of her attention and intense interest, it seemed as if he were looking at his visitor from a new and advantageous angle. He had never had much experience with the opposite sex, nor was he ever impressed by a complex personality. He had been at fault with his caller; he saw it now. Surely there could be no duplicity in his more than merely fair listener. It seemed to him that he had never met with a person so innocently transparent or so faultless in face and figure.

As he talked he became more observant. He had had but a fleeting look at her the day before, but now he noted her every detail, from the set of the steel-gray costume she wore to her golden hair, the fine texture of her cheeks and the daintiness of her small hands which lay folded in her lap. Above her hung the faint perfume he had noticed in her room.

"But you do not know that he had anything to do with your father's death—or that he was your father's

traducer," she said, drawing a deep breath as he completed the story.

"No. I believe it is a man called Welch."

"I never heard of such a person," returned the girl. "But forgive me," she continued entreatingly, holding out her hand. "I doubted you, but I doubt you no longer. My uncle told me nothing of these things—but we seldom speak; we have nothing in common."

"Then you will admit my right to question. It was for your interest, you see." And Wentworth took the extended hand.

"Yes, and to criticise, perhaps. You asked me how it is that I am with him. Indeed, it needs an explanation. I came north with Mr. Bagshot; it was necessary for me to be here and there was no one else to come with me. He proposed acting as my escort, saying he had business here. And I am a perfect stranger in New York. We went to a hotel for a week, then went to the flat because he said it would be cheaper for him. I might have guessed that something was wrong, but did not until last night when I overheard him talking with Joe Planet, a Mexican. Now I know he had an ulterior motive for coming; perhaps the flat was meant for a trap. I think so; I know his character. I am afraid of him. He would kill me if he knew I were here."

"And what did you overhear?"

"It must have been about the paper. He had

been drinking. He talked loud. He threatened you by name. I heard him say that he would have the thing, if it landed him in jail. I was frightened, and—and I determined to tell you."

She was looking at Wentworth as a woman only looks when she has perfect confidence in a man.

"I can hardly thank you enough for your interest," he returned warmly. "Forewarned is forearmed, you know; and I really think that fellow will not care to renew his acquaintance with me. Now that you are here," he said, rising, "let me show you the bone of contention. This is the red paper. I was about to photograph it."

He moved to the table and she followed him. He explained the meaning of the paper as she looked at it wonderingly.

"You may have it now," he said. "It is yours."

The girl took up the map, but there was no expression of greed in her eyes as she said:

"You tell me it is worth much; is it very much?"

"Harper told me it would make you fabulously wealthy."

To Wentworth's astonishment her eyes filled with tears.

"My father made this," she said softly. "It is his writing. He died two weeks after coming back from a trip into western Texas—died suddenly at my aunt's house in Kerrville. It was before she married Bagshot. Your father was there. I was but a child."

"Yes."

She laid the paper down and shuddered as she sank into a chair.

"It is of the color of blood," she said. "It has brought death to two men—my father and yours. I am afraid of it."

"Will you take it now?"

"And relieve you of a responsibility?"

"Not that. I can bear that; but it is yours."

"Not until December," she returned, looking up with a lovely smile shining through her tears. "Must not you keep it until— Oh!"

She suddenly bent her bright head as though listening, and through the quiet of the room there came the sound of men's footsteps on the bare floor of the hall without; then she sprang to her feet, her face blanching as a thunderous knock came on the studio door.

"Oh! What shall I do?" she cried in a strident whisper as she clasped her hands over her heart, her eyes widening in sudden panic.

John Wentworth was also startled by the loud summons, but he did not lose his presence of mind.

"It is probably my servant," he said easily, though the character of the knock made him doubt the truth of his own statement.

"But I would not be seen by any one—by any one! And I know it is he and José—they were coming together! Oh, hide me somewhere! Quick!"



"Oh, what shall I do?" she cried in a strident whisper as she clasped her hands over her heart, her eyes widening in sudden panic.



She looked as if she were about to faint, and John saw that her fear was not to be trifled with.

"Will you trust me?" he asked quietly.

"Yes! Oh, yes!"

"Then step into my dark room for a moment. I will attend to the matter, whatever it may be."

He walked to the door of the developing-room and swung it open. She entered without a word, and he let the door close behind her and then began to move rapidly.

Striding to the table he was about to take the red paper from under the glass when he heard the door of the studio open. With a quick movement he drew a newspaper over the map and turned round. The girl had been right. He was face to face with the man he had knocked down the day before, and behind him there came a thin, dark young fellow, his foreign-looking face adorned with mustache and goatee.

A sudden sense of recognition lighted through the brain of Wentworth, but he could not locate the person nor did he have time for much conjecture, for Bagshot came forward to the center of the room, his face set with a desperate determination there was no mistaking. For a moment he looked around the large apartment as if to assure himself that the young man was alone, then he planted his cane firmly on the floor and drew up his body.

"Now, sir," he began, with an air of determination, but without truculence, "we have come here to see if you can be convinced of the reasonableness of the

demand I made yesterday. Mr. Wentworth, you have and hold that which is mine by right of transfer. We will admit that yesterday I went a bit too far, but you punished me for it—punished me as I deserved. I see, too, that you are a man of resource. You would be valuable to me. Let us be friends—let us come to terms.

## CHAPTER VII

### BAGSHOT MOVES

FOR a moment Wentworth looked hard at the man before him without speaking; in truth, he was silent from inward rage at the impudent temerity of the fellow, and at the same time he was oppressed by the near presence of the young lady, and the knowledge that the red paper was actually within easy reach of his now avowed enemy.

Beyond these things was the insulting swagger of self-sufficiency which marked Bagshot's bearing as he strode into the room without permission and without the common courtesy of removing his hat.

Wentworth had not taken Miss Merridale's account of the threat as very serious. It was beyond his comprehension that Bagshot would dare put in force any attempt to obtain the coveted paper by open violence, and he looked upon the conversation overheard by the young lady as but the vaporings of a disappointed and beaten man in his cups. But Bagshot had come, backed by another, and Wentworth was in no position to meet him; the mere presence of the two was a menace, and the young

man's quick brain determined that to temporize had become necessary, though it would not do to show the least fear to his adversary. He gulped once or twice—as he looked at the man, a dull but dangerous anger rising in him.

"As a rule, sir," he said at last, "when a man knocks at my door, he awaits permission to enter. You did not. Also, out of regard to common decency, sir, he removes his hat. This is a private apartment. Take off your hat before I knock it off."

He spoke quietly, directing his words to Bagshot; of the other he took no apparent notice, though he kept him in view; but the foreigner, whom the young man had already placed in his mind as Joe Planet, promptly removed his soft Stetson and, walking to the easel, spread his legs, clasped his hands behind him and, to all appearances, became absorbed in studying the half-finished painting.

Bagshot followed suit so far as to remove his own hat, but he stood stockily in the position he had assumed.

"Now, what can I do for you, Mr. Merridale?" concluded Wentworth.

"I told you what I came for," said the other.

"So you did—so you did," returned the young man with growing confidence. "But you lacked tact in your approach; you lacked tact yesterday. What are your present terms?"

Bagshot opened his small eyes at the unexpected reply.

"What are yours?" he blurted out.

"Ten million dollars, sir," returned Wentworth, with an assumption at an easiness he did not feel. "The character of the paper warrants the price."

"You told me you didn't know the character of the paper!" exclaimed Bagshot, his face growing red.

"I did not yesterday, but I do to-day."

"How—how—"

"Never mind how. The paper is a map of the lost San Saba mine. There is the fact, but there is an alternative to my demand. You may think it over and give me your answer to-morrow."

"Wentworth," Bagshot said, knitting his brows as he walked over to the divan and dropped heavily upon it, "I came here to-day for the purpose of getting that paper. It is mine—do you understand? And I will have it. There will be no to-morrow in this, so we will settle at once."

"As you would have attempted to do last night, sir, had it not been for my man."

Bagshot flushed a dull red, but made no direct reply to the thrust as he returned: "I will extend my offer. I will give you one thousand dollars for it, down, and guarantee you twenty-five thousand in six months. But ten million! Well, sir, we are not here to joke; you will discover that much! You speak of an alternative; what is it?"

"That you bring me face to face with Welch," returned John quietly, but with an increasing sense of uneasiness.

This man had threatened him; had he come to do violence? The tone of his voice indicated as much. Wentworth cast his eyes about the room for some means of defense in case of necessity, but saw nothing better than a chair. The fencing foils and Indian clubs were in a far corner, with a mass of loose furniture from the house between him and them. There was a revolver in his bedroom, but it was not loaded, nor did he know, in the confusion of the place, where to lay hands on its cartridges. Suppose the two men set upon him, conquered him, and searched the studio?

Whatever became of the paper, Grace Merridale, now crouching in terror in the developing-room, would surely be discovered and be made to suffer, and it was really the possible consequences to her rather than to himself that held the young man from becoming openly defiant. He felt cornered. If Thomas would come the situation would be altered; as it was, he dared not bolt for assistance, leaving the two to search the place in his absence. He thought of it, but his chivalrous responsibility for the lady hidden in the place forbade him allowing her to be discovered. There would be but one interpretation in such an event, and though John Wentworth was no Sir Galahad, he was no coward. There was nothing to do but draw to himself the fire of the enemy.

As he looked around the room he noticed the Mexican had left the easel and was now walking

about, eying a bit of bric-à-brac here or a sketch there, apparently paying no attention to either Bagshot or Wentworth. He had not sought an introduction nor had one been offered; to John it was clear that he was not looked upon as an equal, but even in the whirl of the young man's mind he was conscious of asking himself where he had met or seen the fellow before.

But suddenly he saw more than the moving man, and all thought about him or self-defense disappeared. It was with a feeling of consternation that his eye fell on the exposed corner of the red glass showing from under the edge of the newspaper he had hurriedly and but partially drawn over it. His heart almost stood still. Would Bagshot notice it? Not from where he sat, but if he should approach the table it would be in plain sight; the red glass would suggest the presence of the document. Wentworth muttered a curse. Bagshot laughed harshly as he referred to the young man's demand.

"Welch was a bluff to try you," he sneered. "Whatever effect he might have had on your father, it was a question if the old man's reputation was much to you. If it was, it would take time to work you, and time is an object to me."

At this open sneer Wentworth's self-control was almost lost, but it decided him on an extreme measure. "One moment, sir," he said, and stepped toward the bedroom, intending to get his revolver, which, loaded or unloaded, would have a strong moral effect.

"No, sir!" exclaimed the other, springing to his feet as if he had read the young man's intention, and planting himself in the path before Wentworth could get half-way across the studio. "I am on to your game, sir. You will not arm yourself. You will come to my terms this instant or I will take other steps. You don't know me, young man; if you did you wouldn't wait long to decide favorably on any offer."

He lifted his cane threateningly. Wentworth recoiled a pace.

"Would you have me repeat my performance of yesterday?" he asked.

"Do it, if you can! I know my position, sir—I want your answer now!"

"Then have it now!" shouted Wentworth, losing his hold on himself. "If you know your position, so do I, and I know you. Your name is Bagshot; you are no better than a blackleg, and, by God! not for twice ten million shall you have that paper from me. Now, get out of my way; more than that—leave this room at once or I will call in the police."

Bagshot's light blue eye seemed to turn smaller as he heard his name and this open defiance. His breathing became audible, and he was about to say something, when, from behind his own back, Wentworth heard the words:

*"Ah! Aquí está lo encontrado!"*

He did not understand the language, but the exclamation was forcible, and he turned in time to

see the lithe foreigner, now by the table, sweep the newspaper to the floor and fully expose the ruby glass. He saw the fellow slide the paper from under it, fold it and put it in his pocket, and noted the sallow countenance light with triumphant animation. The thing had been done in less than five seconds.

Bagshot's hard features suddenly relaxed into a grin that was nothing less than repulsive, then the devil of greed leaped into his face as he stepped toward his henchman. From Wentworth's heart the blood went with a rush. He had lost—or almost lost—the precious map, and the quick rage which took possession of him was an unholy thing though it sprang from a righteous cause. For a brief instant he had no plan of action, but tamely to permit the paper to be taken from the studio was far from his intention.

At that moment the face of the girl seemed to appear before him—a face filled with mild reproach. But she was still hidden—the dark-room door was still closed, and he knew this to be a figment of his brain born of excitement.

But he would not have her point her finger at him. He was no coward—he would fight for her.

It was all in an instant. His muscles seemed to knit together of themselves, and as Bagshot stepped by him, as if in contempt of his presence, the violently angry man drove his fist into the Southerner's fat neck, striking him just below the right ear, and sending him to the floor with a crash.

Wentworth did not stop to mark the extent of

the injury he had done. With a bound he was at the hall-door, which he locked, dropping the key into his pocket, then, with a slow and determined step, he advanced on the Mexican, all the blood in his body seemingly surcharging his brain. He would kill this fellow with his bare hands, if necessary, but he would have that map. The law would justify him—Grace Merridale would thank him.

He passed Bagshot as that individual was struggling to his elbow, one hand to his head, his face filled with bewilderment, like one recovering from a swoon. As Wentworth came near the table the Mexican, who had stood as one petrified when his patron went down, suddenly became active. With the quickness of a cat he whisked to the other side of the table, putting the heavy piece of furniture between them, his hands on it, his beady black eyes shining with fear and malignancy, his body bent for a leap in any direction.

To Wentworth his action was enlightening as by it two things were made plain: first, that the fellow was intent not on attack but on escape; and second, that in all probability he was unarmed and had looked to his patron for protection.

But, armed or unarmed, it made little difference to the outraged athlete as he sprang around the table, though like a flash the lithe Mexican eluded him by running around the edge, calling in Spanish to his companion who was trying to recover his senses and feet. Twice did the two circle the broad mahogany, and Wentworth, recognizing that such a chase

would be futile, made a short cut of the affair by lifting the heavy obstacle and tipping it over toward the foreigner.

The massive table crashed to the floor just as Bagshot recovered himself sufficiently to stand up, and the Mexican, abandoning his now useless intrenchment, fled across the room to the hall door where he tore at the knob in a vain endeavor to get out. But the door was fast, and as Wentworth, now dominated by uncontrolled rage, ran toward him, in desperation the Mexican turned to meet him. There might have been something in the American's eye that told of his intention for with one look at Wentworth's face the Southerner let out a shrill scream of terror, then, like a wild animal driven into a corner, he sprang and grappled with his pursuer.

For a moment the two swayed over the floor, the Mexican squirming and twisting from hold after hold until at last his silent and earnest opponent had him firmly by the throat. Wentworth held the man, bending him backward, until he saw the staring black eyes bulge from their sockets and the tongue start from the thin, open lips. It was just as he was ready to drop his limp victim and recover the stolen map that he felt a sickening blow on the back of his own head. The room seemed to flare with a sudden crimson flame, his stomach turned to water, and everything went dark. He loosed his hold, staggered against the wall, hung there a moment, then slid unconscious to the floor.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE PLAN

WHEN Wentworth came to himself he awoke to the fact that he lay on the floor, that Miss Merridale was bending over him, and that his head was wet with water from the sponge she was using.

He struggled up so that he rested against the wall though his exertion had caused the room to whirl in a mad revel.

The girl's face was a study. It was colorless, and held an expression of deep solicitude, but there was nothing tremulous about the sweet mouth and round, firm chin. As the young man opened his eyes her lips parted in an exquisite smile, and her face became animated.

"How—how long have I been this way?" asked John.

"Barely five minutes—not more," she said gently. "It must have been a glancing blow—and your hair saved you. I cannot find any wound."

"Who struck me?"

"Bagshot—with his cane. When he fell I pushed open the door a trifle. You must have knocked

him down. He got up and struck you from behind while you were struggling with José."

"Then it was Planet?"

"Yes. What has he done?"

"Done? He has outraged me and robbed you."

"You mean he has stolen the paper?"

"Yes. He found it where it lay on the table—fool that I was not to have taken it. I was fighting for it."

The girl drew back, but a wonderful tenderness shone from her countenance.

"Ah! Fighting—for me?"

"Ay, for you; for what else or whom else? Did they see you?

"No—oh, no! I dared not show myself; the result would have been awful for me. Planet stood still a minute, rubbing his throat and trying to speak, and Bagshot bent over you. I watched him go through your pockets until he found the key to the hall door. He did not say a word, but in a few seconds he took José by the arm and hurried him out. They didn't wait for the elevator for I heard them running down stairs. Then I got water and came to you. I—I was frightened at first, but am glad it is no worse. And you really risked your life for me! How can I ever thank you?"

"You needn't," said Wentworth, pulling himself up. "Let us say that it was less for you than for the principle of the thing. My father's spirit would reproach me if I had been weak enough to come to

terms with that man. And you are robbed of a fortune! Now, by all the gods of mythology!" He got no further, for the room started to whirl again, and he fell back against the wall.

"Don't attempt to talk now," whispered the girl. "Let me help you to the divan." And in her feminine solicitude, which made her blind to the conventionalities, she put her strong young arm around him and helped him to the couch on which he fell heavily, sick and faint.

After an interval he opened his eyes. "I will soon be all right," he said, detaining the hand that bathed his face. "You are a ministering angel—but what are you going to do now?"

"You mean about the map?"

"Yes."

"I hardly know what to do," she answered, disengaging her hand from his. "Open defiance would gain nothing. My uncle is not without ingenious resources if he is without principle; that is why I did not raise an alarm. He would say he had stolen nothing; that he struck you in self-defense after you assaulted him. There would be color in that. And I cannot prove my right to the paper, while unfortunately, your word alone would not go far in law. It is true he could not prove his assertion that I have transferred my right to him, for I have never done so, but if worse came to worse he would copy the essential parts of the map and destroy the original. I could not prevent him, and—"

"But I can and will," interrupted Wentworth.  
"My father would never forgive me if I dropped the matter here."

"But Bagshot has the paper."

"And I have no copy!" groaned the man. "What you say is true. We are defeated—unless you will be directed by me and have the spirit to act."

"And what would you have me do, Mr. Wentworth?"

"I mean this," said Wentworth, struggling to a sitting position. "That which may not be gained by force or law might be gained by subterfuge. One must sometimes fight fire with fire."

"I do not—I do not understand," she faltered.

"I see how it can be done," was the quick reply. "It is well Bagshot does not dream that you witnessed his coming or knows you are here; well that you raised no alarm. There is but one way. You must steal that paper from your uncle—for of course he and not Planet has it by this. You must play the innocent. Take Lady Macbeth's advice to her husband —look like a flower, but be a serpent. Stick to him. Your chance will come. As for me, I have a grievance apart from yours, and it will be but a few hours before I face that fellow again." The speaker's enthusiasm made him stronger. "I will corner him, by Heaven! and before he has time to copy the map! I will play against him openly while you work in secret. That brute shall not get that

which is yours—that which is my duty to see that you get—so long as I can fight for you."

The young lady's face colored deeply as she listened to this outburst of modern knight errantry. "Ah, but I have found a friend!" she said, quick tears filling her blue eyes. "Do not think I lack spirit. I see your plan, and, indeed, under the circumstances, it is more feasible than a resort to violence. I will do it. I will stay by him through everything—and watch for my opportunity."

"You will steal it?"

"I promise, though it would not be theft. He shall not profit by that paper, even if I have to destroy it. It is not wealth I wish. I have ample means besides my ranch, but it would be a sin to let him triumph in this. I shall follow him like a shadow."

She appeared equal to that and more as she stood up and held out her ungloved hand to Wentworth. "It is best that I go now," she said.

The young man took the extended hand, and on an impulse raised it to his lips. It was done in perfect respect. The girl flushed rosily, but the hand was not snatched away in prudish haste. The act was like the sealing of a compact between them.

"If the Lord lets me live, I will see you to-morrow," said Wentworth, as the smooth fingers slid from his grasp.

"Be careful—oh, be careful!" she exclaimed.

"Have no fear for me," returned John, with the

ghost of a smile. "I shall not be alone this time—and I am stronger with a new strength."

She left him, but her cheeks were like roses as she turned away.

If John Wentworth had not been a perfectly healthy animal, the shock of his experience would have led to a fever, but instead of worrying over past events, he allowed the prospects of the future to comfort him. He was still too weak and miserable to attempt to lift the overturned table, or even gather its scattered contents, and lay back on the divan until nature took him in hand and sent him into a restoring sleep. It was late in the afternoon when he awoke with a start to find Thomas standing over him.

"I have a letter for you, sir," said the discreet butler, as his master opened his eyes. He appeared not to have noticed the condition of the room.

Wentworth sat up and looked around in the dazed and comical way of one aroused from deep slumber. His brain was clear, albeit his head was sore and there was a lump on it, but he was in good humor.

"A letter, Thomas?"

"Yes, sir. I found it in the box."

"I think the room needs a little of your care, Thomas," said Wentworth, tearing the flap of the envelope.

"I dessay, sir," said the butler, without moving, but his fine old face was troubled.

"And, Thomas, I have a very bad head."

"Yes, sir. Quite natural, sir," was the imperturbable reply. "Shall I get you some soda, sir?"

Wentworth looked up quickly and caught the expression of doubt and solicitude on the old man's face. "Why, you superannuated old idiot!" he exclaimed, with affectionate banter. "You think I have been on a spree! Not on your life, Thomas. I simply had a brief interview with the parties who tried to flim-flam you last night, and I got a blow on the head."

"Good Lord, sir!" Thomas' face turned pale. "And I was not here!"

"That was fairly evident to me. No one was here--of consequence--to defend me."

"God bless my soul, Master John! And did they rob you?"

"Personally I think I lost nothing--and yet, Thomas, I may have. But I feel pretty sure I have their goat."

"Their goat, sir?" Modern slang was lost on the old servitor. He glanced quickly around the room as if expecting to see one of the genus Capricornus, then looked into the face of his master, the trouble deepening on his own.

"I am speaking metaphorically, my good friend. I do not refer to an animal, but to a condition. Of course nothing will prompt you to mention what I have told you."

"Yes, sir; of course, sir. But if the police--"

"Never mind the police, Thomas. I will take care

of that end of it. Now, if you will run out and get me some witch-hazel I'll try to reduce this bump of combativeness on my head.

"Yes, sir, certainly, sir; and—" He stopped as his eye caught sight of something on the floor. He stooped and picked it up gingerly, his face becoming set as he recognized and held out a lady's embroidered handkerchief. "I beg pardon, sir."

"Strange!" said Wentworth, putting down the unopened letter and taking the dainty square of fine linen held toward him. "I wonder how this thing got here. It must belong to a lady!"

"Yes, sir. I fancy so, Master John."

"I see! One of those gay Lotharios must have dropped it in the scrimmage. It is valueless except as a clue."

"Perhaps Miss Lothario might have—"

"Never mind, Thomas. Now for the witch-hazel."

The old man went toward the door, walking slowly. In the hall he stopped, looked back at the studio, shook his white head, sighed profoundly and went on his errand. As for Wentworth, he emphasized the worthlessness of the handkerchief by inhaling its delicate perfume, folding it thoughtfully and putting it carefully in the breast pocket of his coat. That done he turned attention to the neglected note.

It was from Harper, and had evidently been sent by messenger. It read:

*Dear Jack:*

*Got home to discover things in a devil of a pothor owing to the governor being down with a sudden and severe attack of gout. You know the old gentleman. He is as irascible as the deuce and won't let me out of his sight. Will try to see you to-morrow, but may not make it until next day. Hope you have a good photo, and made original safe.*

*TOM.*

Wentworth smiled grimly, and gently touched the protuberance on his head. "I fancy it's safe enough from me!" he muttered. "And the chances are that I will have to work without you, old man!"

He was impatient to start out on his campaign of revenge, but he felt his present inability and uselessness. When Thomas returned he allowed the old man to bathe and bandage his head, refusing in set terms to have a doctor; then he ate sparingly, dismissed the butler, and went to bed early. His mind was fully made up as to what he would do the following day, but in the morning he found himself with but little energy, though the swelling on the side of his head had gone down and was less sensitive. The hours were lost in hoping and waiting for Harper, but, as that individual was not forthcoming, Wentworth determined to act alone.

By noon he felt better and went out to lunch, after which he started down-town. Knowing the power of money, and its probable necessity in carrying out

his purpose, he called at his bank and drew three hundred dollars, mostly in small bills, then hailing a taxicab he gave orders to be taken to Police Headquarters. He had determined to run no further risks, and his next act should be backed by the arm of the law. He had been assaulted. Perhaps the arrest of Bagshot might bring that individual to terms; at all events, it would soothe his own hurt pride and make some amends for the lump that came just within the leather of his hat.

In front of the stone palace on Center Street he dismissed the taxi', and entered the building.

## CHAPTER IX

### ANOTHER LETTER

WENTWORTH'S first step was a technical blunder, though in the end it proved a fortunate one. Instead of asking for the chief of police, he requested an interview with the head of the detective department, and after being passed from hand to hand, was finally ushered into the office of that functionary, only to find he was out of town. Wentworth was about to inquire of the clerk as to who represented the chief, when the door of the room opened and a young man softly entered. For a moment the two looked at each other, and then the stranger spoke.

"This is Mr. Wentworth?"

"Yes," said John. "I have seen you before, somewhere, but unfortunately I cannot place the occasion."

"And small wonder," returned the other. "I saw you but for an instant on the night of—of your father's death. You may remember that I had something to say to you, but you were in no shape to listen and the inspector choked me off. You went upstairs."

"Ah, yes. I have in indistinct recollection of it."

"Are you here, may I ask, on that business?"

There was something in the frank and respectful manner of the young fellow that caused Wentworth to warm toward him; moreover, it was a relief to find one in that place who was not an utter stranger. He remembered that the man had said he was a detective, but there was little of the air of a thief-catcher in his open countenance, his clear blue eye, and his fresh-colored and almost boyish cheek.

"The matter may be distantly related to my father's death," was the reply. "I need help, and came here to get it."

"By Heaven, sir," said the other with enthusiasm, "we are both lucky. I was about to look you up, Mr. Wentworth. I expected to see you the day after that affair, but on my coming back here I was at once sent out of town on a case. I returned this morning. Would you mind coming to my quarters for a few minutes? Perhaps I can help you out in the way you wish; anyway, I have something important to say to you."

"Something important?"

"Yes, sir. If you will step into my room I will explain."

Soon after the two were seated in a little office in which there was no furniture save a desk and two chairs. The walls were bare, and there was nothing in the surroundings either to stimulate imagination or interfere with thought. The detective

closed the door, kicked a black bag out of his way, and seating himself at the desk, opened a drawer, took out a box of cigars and offered it to his visitor.

"My name is Bunson, Mr. Wentworth," he said, throwing himself back in his chair after the two had lighted up. "You never heard of me, of course, because I have done nothing to make my name thunder, and haven't yet got on the advertising side of the reporters."

He smiled, showing a fine set of teeth.

"Let us get right down to business. I will first tell you what I have to say, then listen to you. The night I went to your house I heard that you had stated your belief that Captain Wentworth had been murdered, but by the others who had arrived before me your idea was ridiculed; no convincing evidence of violence had been discovered. But I never take the opinions of others as a guide to my own conclusions, and, as a member of a force of the methods of which few know much, and the public knows absolutely nothing, I generally keep my conclusions to myself until they can be verified."

He looked fixedly at Wentworth; the young man made no reply beyond a nod of understanding. "Now, sir," continued the detective, impressively, "on the night I visited your house I made an important discovery, and one that inclines me to believe you were right in thinking your father was murdered."

He paused to let the statement have its full effect; and that it did have was apparent in the set, white

face of the visitor. What was coming? For a moment Wentworth stared at the detective, then his lips formed rather than spoke the question:

"By whom?"

"By a man named Bagshot. Perhaps you know—What's the matter, sir?"

Wentworth had risen to his feet like one confronted by a ghost.

"Bagshot! Bagshot!" he ejaculated. "It was about him that I came here! What do you know?"

"Nothing that is absolutely certain," said Bunsen, as Wentworth resumed his seat, "but I have suspicions—well-founded suspicions. I have kept them to myself, so far. We of the New York police force are human, sir—jealous, if you please. I have no intention of sharing any possible glory I may get from my profession. The evidence I found I have kept secret until I could see you."

"And what have you found?" demanded Wentworth, gaining strength of voice as his heart steadied.

"This, sir," returned the other, opening the wallet he took from his pocket and extracting a paper. "I happened to be the only one who had the wit or wisdom to look under the blotting-pad on your father's desk. I was alone when I found it. Of course I was searching without definite hope of getting evidence to carry out your theory, but I think the evidence is here. You will see that this paper is dated the day of your father's death, and by comparisons I know it was written by Captain Went-

worth. You will see that it is unfinished—as if he had been interrupted while writing it—that he had hidden it temporarily under the pad, and intended to complete it."

Bunsen opened the paper and laid it on Wentworth's knee. The young man was fairly trembling in his eagerness. Surely it was his father's writing; he knew it at once. It read:

*Mr. Simeon Bagshot,  
West 84th St., City.*

*Sir:*

*You asked me for a definite answer to your demand of two days ago, but I have waited until now to reply to you because I have had a struggle with myself. And, sir, I have won. Shall I, on the threshold of the grave, succumb to the demands of such a monster as you? to such a poltroon! Never. You have taken most of my fortune; is not that enough? In addition to the loss of my reputation you speak of violence, if I do not meet your wishes. In plain terms, you threaten to murder me. I laugh at the threat, though morally I believe you equal to the attempt.*

*Before you receive this I shall have passed the paper into the care of my son, and will have given him a full explanation, as I should have done years ago. In future you may deal with him—if you dare—for the—*

Here the letter ended abruptly, and it had evidently been hurriedly placed under the pad without being blotted, for the last line was blurred.

"The bottom of the pad has ink on it," said the detective quietly as John finished reading. "A small matter, but something."

Wentworth's hands were trembling. "My Heavens!" he ejaculated under his breath; "and I have had my hands on Bagshot twice since this was written."

"You? On Bagshot! How?"

"I will tell you; but first let me get control of myself," said the young man, rising and striding up and down the confined limits of the room. In a few moments he reseated himself and point by point told the story as he had told it to Harper, but now adding the adventure of the day before. Bunsen listened attentively, his eyes lighting with intelligence, but otherwise his face was sphinx-like. When John had finished the detective rose to his feet.

"We have hardly enough in this to make it plain that Bagshot saw your father at all that night, though the letter speaks of threats against the colonel's life. But with your story and this letter we have enough to at least cause the man's arrest on suspicion.

"You want him for assault and robbery, if for nothing else. He's got what he was after, and you can bet he'll act quickly now. We have no time to lose. What do you know about Planet? Had you seen him before yesterday?"

"No," said Wentworth, but, as he uttered the word, a light burst upon him. "Yes—yes!" he exclaimed. "I have it—I did see him—I remember.

It was on the night of the murder, by Heaven! He was in front of my father's house! He asked me the hour! I could swear to him!"

"Wait here a moment until I can report my absence!" cried Bunsen, jumping to the door. "I will go with you at once. We'll nab our man within an hour!"

He rushed from the room, but was back before Wentworth could gather his flying thoughts together. Opening the bag under his desk, the detective took from it a revolver and a pair of handcuffs, which he stuffed into his pockets.

"Come along," he said, now all animation and activity.

And the two hurried out.

As they reached the street the sound of a fast-striking gong caught the attention of both, and the next moment a fire-engine tore by, going up Center Street. In the trail of its smoke a hook-and-ladder truck went after it at full speed. "Fire up-town somewhere," said Bunsen, "and I think we are going to start something of a blaze, ourselves." He laughed.

"What is your plan of action?" asked Wentworth, as they strode toward the subway station at Worth Street.

"It is simple enough," said the detective, sobering. "But I will admit I am taking long chances in the matter. I would feel better armed if I had a warrant, but to get a warrant would take time, and I figure

we haven't a moment to lose. This is a mighty unique case, sir, and if I can pull it off it will be a big feather in my cap. As for my plan—it is to catch the men any way I can, and lock them up. If one squeals on the other, so much the better. You want the paper; I want Bagshot; and if I get him I'll make some of those wiseacres that had the case in hand feel like a plugged nickel. Here we are, sir."

The two descended into the subway. A few people stood aimlessly on the long platform, but no roar of an approaching train echoed through the tube and the great tunnel was unnaturally quiet. Over the ticket-agent's window was a hurriedly written sign:

*"Trains not running. No tickets sold until  
further orders."*

"What's this about?" said Bunsen, bending his head to the hand-hole in the glass.

"Fire in Parker Building up-town. Danger to subway from falling walls, I suppose. No tickets sold. That's all I know about it. You may have to wait five minutes—or five hours—I don't know."

"Block number one!" said Bunsen, turning to Wentworth. "It's always so; but a bad beginning, you know. We'll have to go over to the elevated."

There was little else to do, and they made the trip almost in silence. In half an hour they were out of the train, and noticed that from Eighty-first Street to some distance above, the down track was blocked

by a line of standing cars. But this was not occasioned by fire; the up-town trains still passed, and the line ran nowhere near the burning Parker Building.

Without stopping to inquire the trouble, the two went on, and in ten minutes more were in front of the apartment-house. Wentworth was about to go into the vestibule and ring the bell when Bunsen held him back.

"Don't get excited, sir. I know a trick worth ten of that. A ring might be a warning to a fellow in Bagshot's fix. Come with me."

He went down to the tradesman's door in the basement, Wentworth following, and together the two men went upstairs. But there had been no occasion for their caution, for the door of the Merridale flat was open and a man was sweeping out the private hall. As Wentworth glanced in and marked the litter lying about, his heart sank; he felt that it was too late; that the birds had flown. He walked up to the sweeper.

"Are you the janitor?" he asked.

"I am that," was the answer given in a surly tone, and with barely a glance at the questioner. Wentworth was too full of his errand to take warning from the man's attitude. "Where are the tenants who were here—the Merridales?" he asked.

"'Tis no business o' mine where they be," was the short return to the abrupt and tactless question.

"Have they gone?"

"They hov, me fine felly."

"Where? Do you know?"

"An' if I did, the likes o' me would not be tellin' it to ye; mind that."

The reply was decidedly aggressive, and the two eyed each other belligerently. Bunsen touched John on the shoulder and laughed lightly.

"I think, sir," he said, "you had better have left this to me. The old adage—molasses and vinegar, you know, sir. This is a matter for haste—and soap, sir. We'll have to grease his wheels, I take it. Are you fixed?"

Wentworth recognized his mistake, but set about to rectify it. Taking out his wallet he extracted a bill.

"See here, my friend," he said, speaking in a modified tone, "we wish to know where Mr. Merridale is. Come, now, when did he go?"

And he passed the bill into the janitor's hand.

"Well, sor, if that's the way of it, he went this mornin'."

"But he has left all his furniture behind!" said John, looking around the parlor and noticing that its general appearance was unchanged; even the chair he had smashed lay in a corner, but the trunks were gone.

"Faith, the fixin's didn't belong to him! He sublet the place. Mr. Duke was as foine a gentleman as—"

"We don't care for him," interrupted Bunsen in a gentle voice. "Do you know where the Merridales went?"

"No, sir, on me anner, I don't. They went off afoot this marnin', say ten o'clock."

"And the trunks?"

"Pat Cody's express kem after thim arly—say eight o'clock."

"Thank you. How many went—of the people?"

"The two, sir; the young leddy an' her dad."

"No one else?"

"Why, a furrin-lookin' chap was here for a little, but I saw him go out arly—whin I was sweepin' the walk."

"Good! Joe Planet!" said Bunsen.

"Like as not. I heard him called Joe," said the janitor.

"And you don't know where the trunks went?"

"So help me, I do not. How cud I?"

"I believe you. Where is Cody's stand?"

"Round the corner—furninst a bookstore. Ye can't help seein' it. May I ask ye what ye want of the Merridale feller?"

"Well, that's rather too much to the point," said the detective. "And you can tell us no more of him, I suppose?"

"I can, then," said the janitor. "He managed to smash a windy in the basement with somethin' tied to a long cord --Heaven knows why—an' he stove in this dure, though he denied it like the thafe he is. He was a deep wan, sir; a felley I niver liked; but the leddy—she was different." The

man pointed to the splintered panel. Wentworth smiled but said nothing.

"Very good—very good," said the detective smoothly. "I think that's all. Come, Mr. Wentworth, we have one more chance to save our jelly. We'll try Cody."

The big janitor watched them hurry down the stairs.

"An' much good he'll get o' Cody!" he muttered, resuming his broom and his work.

"Block *zwei!*!" muttered Bunsen, as he reached the front door.

## CHAPTER X

### A MATTER OF HASTE

**A**S the two men emerged into the street heated by the afternoon sun, neither spoke. The detective's mouth was set with a determination which might have been mixed with an expression of disappointment, but Wentworth was beset by something like a sense of shame.

For in spite of himself a great wave of suspicion had taken possession of him. Was it possible that Grace Merridale had been false to her promise—had gone and left no word, when he had told her he expected to see her that day? Or—his cheeks grew hot at the thought—had he been only a confiding fool? Had the girl been merely a stool-pigeon deliberately paving the way for Bagshot? Had that individual known of her presence in the studio—in fact, sent her there? Perhaps the girl was not Grace Merridale! Great Cæsar! What an ass he had been to have allowed himself to be so easily hoodwinked by a pretty woman with the airs and graces of an angel—one who had aroused his interest

as no other woman had yet done. And with no more recommendation than that carried in her face he had taken her into his full confidence, and proclaimed his idiotic weakness by kissing her hand! More—he had shown her the paper, the very thing she wished, the very thing for which she had worked him; and then to appear innocent she had played at terror that she might save her patron—or worse—from being at once pursued.

"Hell!" muttered the young man, as he walked rapidly by the side of the silent Bunsen, perspiration suddenly streaming from every pore. "In the name of all the saints! how can I expose my utter idiocy to Harper? I ought to have a nurse!"

Then another thought struck him. If she were a fraud why all that strenuous business? I offered her the paper before those villains came in. Why didn't she take it?

The puzzle smote him, bringing a sense of relief, and so affected him that he stopped on the sidewalk. "What's the trouble?" asked Bunsen. "Got an idea?"

"Yes—but it's not a practical one," returned Wentworth from whom nothing could have dragged his present thoughts.

"Then you stop for nothing," was the ungracious reply.

Mr. Patrick Cody, expressman, sat on an upturned trunk, smoking a black cigar and rubbing

his stubby red beard with a thick, red hand when Bunsen and Wentworth halted in front of his stand.

"Cody's Express?" asked the detective with an insinuating smile.

"Yis," was the short answer.

"You are Cody?"

"Yis."

"I believe you moved three trunks from the third flat of number—, round the corner, this morning."

"Well, what av it?"

"If you don't mind, we would like to know where you took them."

The detective's voice was fairly purring with goodwill, but Cody glowered at him.

"Ye wud! Well, if that's yer only business, ye can run along after I'm telling ye I tuk thim to me express wagon." The tone was uncompromising, and it was evident that Cody's temper was set on a hair-trigger. Bunsen turned easily to Wentworth, speaking in a low tone:

"Looks like block number three! More soap, sir." John took out his wallet, but before he could extract a bill the little Irishman bristled.

"None o' that with me, now! I know youse fellys! Ye think because ye hov—"

"Look here!" exclaimed Bunsen, wheeling on the sour man. "Who do you take us for?"

"Do ye want me to move a trunk, or anny stuff?"

"No, we do not."

"Then, I take ye for a couple o' loafers—an' that's all ye get from me."

"And you refuse to answer a civil question?"

"I do that. G'wan—ye bother me."

"Put up your pocketbook, Mr. Wentworth," said the detective briskly, an ugly look coming into his boyish face. "I'll attend to this chap."

He threw open his vest and, walking up to the Irishman, who now wore a decidedly defiant aspect, laid one hand on his shoulder and with the other tapped the silver shield which was pinned to his suspender.

"You come with me, my fine lad! By the time you've cooled your heels at headquarters for a few hours you may take it into your head to answer me."

"Who are ye?" demanded Cody, sliding from the trunk, but not from the grasp that held him, his jaw falling.

"Detective from central office, my garrulous friend," returned Bunsen, taking the handcuffs from his pocket. "You are helping the flight of a criminal, which in itself is a criminal offense. See? I fancy we can pry open your mouth."

"Fore Heaven, sir!" said Cody, the ruddiness fading from his face. "I know nothing about it, sir! I only tuk the trunks!"

"You lie!" said Bunsen sharply. "You were paid for keeping your head shut. How much?"

Cody seemed to shrink to half his normal height and his face took on a look of panic.

"I—I. The gentleman gave me five dollars, but he didn't tell me—"

"No matter what he didn't tell you! Where did you take the trunks?"

"To—to the Texas Line pier, sir, East River. That's the truth."

"I think likely!" said Bunsen, flashing a glance at John. "When does the steamer sail?"

"So help me, I don't know, sir. This day, I think. If ye let go your holdt I'll see. There's an X. Y. Z. Guide inside."

"Get it," said Bunsen crisply, letting go his grip on the thoroughly cowed expressman. When the book was brought he ran over its leaves in feverish haste until he found what he wished.

"Texas Line to Galveston! Pier—, East River. The *Lone Star*. By thunder, Mr. Wentworth, she sails this afternoon at five o'clock! What time is it?"

Wentworth drew out his watch and snapped it open. "Three thirty-five."

"Good Lord! An hour and twenty-five minutes, with the subway likely to be blocked, and the elevated at a standstill!" Both men glanced upward to where the line of trains still lay motionless. Down by Eighty-first Street a crowd stood on the corner, looking upward.

"A car jumped the switch beyant the station," said the expressman, in a desire to ingratiate himself with the detective.

"What's to be done?" asked Wentworth, in consternation at the combination of circumstances which had thwarted them from the start. In face of the presence of Bunsen who was directing matters he did not look to his own resources.

"By the Lord Harry! Block number four!" exclaimed the detective. "The chances are that the subway is not running, either; and if it were the trains would crawl. Is there a livery-stable, or—better—a garage hereabouts?" he asked, turning quickly to the Irishman.

"I don't know of wan, sir," said the man respectfully. "Ye might hov me wagon, only 'tis out."

"By the powers," exclaimed the detective, "this is desperate! Come on, Mr. Wentworth. There's one chance for us!—and only one."

"Why not 'phone to the pier and demand Bagshot's arrest?" suggested Wentworth. Bunsen laughed.

"On what authority? Would a mere telephone message be a warrant to drag a passenger from a steamer—or even delay the vessel's sailing hour? No, sir; I had thought of that. We have got to be on the spot and show cause. Damn these roads! Everything seems to have conspired against us! But, as I have said, there is one chance. Come, sir—we must step out."

They walked to the corner of Eighty-third Street, Bunsen looking up and down the long block. Half-way to Central Park a taxicab stood in front of a private residence, the chauffeur nodding sleepily behind the steering-wheel.

"Aha—just the thing!" exclaimed the detective, catching his companion by the arm and hurrying him across the avenue. Almost on a run they reached the taxicab. Bunsen pulled open the door and pushed Wentworth in. "It's all right, sir. I'll attend to this."

At the sound of voices by his ear the somnolent chauffeur woke up. "Whatcher y' mean, you bloomin' loafer?" he shouted. "Git out o' that. This here cab's engaged! Dontcher see th' sign?" He was off his seat and on the walk before he finished his protest. Bunsen calmly confronted him.

"Yes, I see the cab is engaged—and I am the one who engaged it. If—"

"Don't you try to play me for a sucker, you rube. This here cab is engaged by a lady in th' house. I know what I'm talkin' about! Git out o' there." The last to Wentworth.

"Stay where you are, sir," said Bunsen; then turning to the irate chauffeur he wagged his finger in the man's face. "I've about thirty seconds to waste on you, my friend," he said, again opening his vest and tapping his official badge. "I'm a police detective chasing a murderer. We want this car—

as no railroads are running—and we're going to take it in the name of the law. Choke that into yourself. If you care to work for us and obey directions, well and good; if not, I'll seize and run her myself—and it wont be the first time I've swung a wheel. Now, sir, as for you. I'll hold you unharmed in the matter, and, moreover, it will be a ten dollar bill for you, over and above your regular fare. Speak quick. Will you take the wheel or shall I?"

"For two cents I'd smash you!" was the truculent reply, but without truculence of attitude.

"That's up to you, son! If you think you can down the police force of this ville take a try on one of them right now. This taxi' goes—see? I'll give you ten seconds to decide about going with it."

The man hesitated and looked up at the house. Bunsen turned and slammed the door of the vehicle, but before he could do more the chauffeur decided.

"That was all guff about the smashin', cull."

"I imagine as much."

"You'll make it all right at the station?"

"I told you so."

"It'll cost me my job."

"I'll see that it don't."

"All right. I fall for the ten—an' take a chance. Where do you want to go?"

"First, to the court-house—then to pier—East River. And you can drive like it was a joy-ride; I'll back you. But if you try anything funny with

me you'll find yourself in the cooler for your pains."

"You win!" exclaimed the man. "Jump in." Bunsen stepped to the small seat by the driver. In a moment they were off.

Wentworth was fairly dazed by the suddenness of it all, and he had a new and mighty respect for the detective. The easy-going man had not realized the possibilities for a strenuous spirit armed with the law—one of quick wit and determined character. But as the taxi' flew along he regained his composure and lighting a cigarette, wondered why the swaying vehicle was not stopped by some outraged policeman of the traffic squad; then he thought of the detective's badge, and was comforted.

All that troubled him now was the, to him, presumable fact that he had been fooled by a girl—he, a man of the world. He was losing sight of one of his motives in acting. At this time he was not chasing Bagshot so much for having stolen the map of the lost San Saba mine as for being the probable murderer, and traducer, of his father. And now he had hopes of catching him.

Going over to Madison Avenue as the least congested thoroughfare, and so down Fourth Avenue, the taxi' stopped for an instant at Cooper Square, and Bunsen jumped from the box and took his place by Wentworth. "What time now?" he asked sharply, as they started again.

"Four o'clock," was the answer.

"Good! We'll get him! Shows the value of a strong bluff, sir," said the detective, laughing easily. "Had Cody called me I would have had to lay down my cards. I had no warrant—no shadow of a right to arrest him without one, but I thought I saw through the fellow. This taxi' is all right. I am chasing a criminal—the law provides for such cases, but I am weak from lack of papers and dare not tackle my man without them now; the steamship company must and would protect its passengers."

"I see," said Wentworth; "But even if this had failed—even if we had not learned of Bagshot's whereabouts until he had sailed, we could still have recourse to wireless telegraphy. Every steamer carries wireless, I believe."

"Right you are, regarding the machine," returned Bunsen, whose brows were knitted as he looked straight ahead, "but do you know, sir, that as the powers that rule have decided that your father did not die by violence I doubt if they would care to reopen your case and prove themselves wrong. So much for humanity—or inhumanity! And would it do any good if they did reopen the case? Suppose we ordered the arrest of Bagshot, by wireless, and suppose he traveled under another name. Where would we be?"

"Then telegraph to Galveston, giving his description, and have him arrested on arrival."

Bunsen smiled grimly. "Do you know that he is going to Texas by sea—or to Texas at all? Doesn't it occur to you that the trunks may be a blind? What shall prevent him from doubling on his tracks?"

Wentworth sat back aghast.

"But, sir," continued the detective, "between you and me and the post, he is going on the *Lone Star*. Though I can't bank on my belief I am taking chances. Here's my plan, sir. I jump down at the court-house and get a warrant of arrest—I have a pull in there. You go on to the steamer. Give the chauffeur ten dollars—I promised that—you're the bank. Then see the purser or the agent or the captain, and do anything to hold the boat until I get there. I leave the matter to you. But first you had better be sure our game is on board. Catch on?"

"Perfectly."

"And keep out of sight yourself. If Bagshot or Planet caught a glimpse of you our half-baked cake might be made dough in a pig's whisper. However, you can bet I'll be there if there's a judge on the bench."

The clean-cut, rapid fire of the detective's speech, and his decision of character, made it impossible for Wentworth to criticise the outlined plan, though he did not like his own commission. He was unused to this kind of business; he had been dwelling apart from a world in which the clash of man with his

fellow cut such a large figure. In theory he accepted such warfare as necessary, but had never dreamed he would be dragged into it. He seemed to have been born anew. The *ennui* which oppressed him before and since his father's death had been dissipated in the rush of late events, but mingled with the relief of changed conditions was a feeling of keen disappointment which centered around the personality of the girl who had hoodwinked him. He was thoroughly ashamed of himself.

Wentworth asked the detective for no details; he looked upon doing so as a sign of weakness and want of confidence; nor, when the taxi swung from Broadway and stopped in front of the granite monstrosity known as the "court-house," did he have any plan of action; in fact he doubted the ability of any one, not armed with the law, to stop the sailing of the *Lone Star* if the officials decided it was to proceed on its voyage. But he did not voice this conclusion to Bunsen as that individual leaped out.

"We have all the time we need, sir," said the detective, slamming the door after him. "Look for me in about half an hour. I will be there before she sails." He ran up the broad stone steps, and the vehicle went on.

On account of blocked traffic it was some little time before the pier was reached. Wentworth got out and handed the chauffeur twenty dollars, turning away without seeing the salute of the astonished

driver. A few moments later he stood in the pier office of the passenger-agent.

"May I see your list of passengers?" he asked of a hard-faced man who, in an inky linen coat, was writing as if his life depended on his haste. He stopped long enough to whirl a book in front of his visitor, but he did not look up. Wentworth glanced down the short column. There they were.

*Mr. Simeon Bagshot; Mr. José Planet; Miss Grace Merridale;* all of New York. So she was Grace Merridale.

And it was somewhat evident that the criminal felt fairly safe. It was also possible, the young man thought, that Bagshot had too small a respect for the man he had outraged and robbed. The very display of the names was like an insult to Wentworth; he had presumably not been thought worthy of consideration; there was no disguise either of person or destination. The young man bit his lip and turned to the writing clerk.

"Are you the agent, sir?"

"Yes. What do you want?"

"Sir," said John, his pulses rising. "you have two passengers aboard the *Lone Star* who are criminals running from justice. I have traced them here. With this knowledge you will put nothing in the way of their arrest, I presume? Is there an officer on the pier?"

The hard-faced man dropped his pen and looked

up quickly. "Running away! Criminals! What names?"

"Bagshot and Planet."

"What do you come to me for? What do you want an officer for? Are they condemned criminals?"

"No, sir; not yet."

"Haven't you a warrant?"

"No, I have not, but—"

"But nothing! What in the devil do you take me for, a fool?—and the police, too? Who are you?"

"A private citizen, sir. My name—"

"I don't care a curse for your name! Don't you see I am up to my neck, and with no time to waste on ignorance? The steamer sails in less than half an hour, and—"

"Can you not hold her for a few minutes over if the warrant does not arrive in time? I am expecting—"

"Not a second, sir, not a second! Mr. What's-your-name, if you find your parties on the pier you can take them for all I care, but on our boat, sir, they are safe unless you can come to me heeled better than you are. I mean no disrespect—but there's the door behind you."

And, without vouchsafing another word, the agent bent over his papers.

John was angry. But what could he say or do? To argue would be a loss of time; moreover, he had no argument.

"I wonder what numbered block Bunsen would call this!" he muttered, as with a heightened color he left the office. In the shelter of a pile of freight he halted and considered. There was nothing for it but to go aboard the steamer and risk being seen by those whom he wished to avoid, and leaving his cover, he approached the gangway with his head down. He dared not look up and, therefore, did not catch the cautionary wave of a handkerchief, nor did he hear the light call of his name from the rail of the deck above him; the growing thunder of the escaping steam from the safety-valve of the waiting vessel prevented that.

## CHAPTER XI

### ON THE LONE STAR

THE list he had looked at showed Wentworth that there were not more than a round dozen of passengers bound South; it was not the time of year to attract travel to Texas, and, therefore, there was no confusion on and round the gangplank as he walked up its incline; even the bustle of stevedores was lessening. He inquired his way to the purser's office, and on finding it, was informed that the purser was on the pier attending to business. After a glance at the weak face of the young assistant, Wentworth concluded that he would be incapable of helping him and, therefore, determined to strike at once at the highest authority: the captain. He was told that that official was probably on deck, aft, and with a gradually fading hope of being able to do much with the vessel's commander at such a time, he went down the long, dim passage between decks, toward the stern of the steamer. He met no one until he emerged into the saloon and was about to go up the companionway, when he heard

a quick exclamation and found himself confronting Grace Merridale.

Next to Bagshot himself the girl was about the last person Wentworth cared to meet, for with his present notion of her untrustworthiness, and the necessity of his presence remaining unknown to her uncle, he felt that for him the fat was in the fire. Bagshot would be warned of his coming, and, so enlightened, would know what was afoot. The young man drew himself up stiffly.

The girl's face was drawn and haggard, notwithstanding that her cheeks were flushed and her eyes shining from excitement. "Oh, I saw you coming up the pier!" she exclaimed in a whisper.

"Yes?" There was an uncompromising terseness in the return."

"I—I am so glad! But we cannot stand here," she said, apparently not remarking the man's coldness. "Come with me, please."

She turned from him, whisking herself into the short passage from which she had emerged, and Wentworth, with no definite intention of any kind, followed her, perhaps only for the reason that she had asked him. At the further end of the passage she opened a state-room door, and with a finger on her lips held it for Wentworth to enter, which he did. Closing the door she turned and faced him. "Thank Heaven!" she exclaimed, breathing as if after a violent exertion. "Then you received my letter?

Why did you come this way? They might have seen you! Have you—are you quite recovered?"

For the past two hours the young man had so completely lost faith in the girl he had tried to befriend, that on the instant of the unexpected meeting he had only the feeling that, as Bunsen had expressed it, his half-baked cake had gone suddenly to dough. But as he now saw her face in the clear, white light coming through the open port-hole, he felt that possibly his disappointment had tinctured his judgment—that possibly he had leaped to a conclusion which might prove unwarranted. Or was it that she was still playing with him? guessing his errand, and holding him from its completion? Looking into her face it was impossible to believe it. Wentworth was human—and young—but he did not purpose to be deceived again, if deceived he had been; yet he knew that now the policy of honesty would serve him better than inventing a lie.

"I have had no letter from you," he answered.

"Then how did you know—"

"I traced you here—and came without the hope of meeting you. I am waiting for an officer with a warrant for your uncle and Planet."

"No letter from me! I sent one—by special delivery—and paid the janitor to mail it. Oh, it is too late! The steamer sails in a few minutes! It was not until last night that I knew of my uncle's intentions. I did not demur; I appeared to be glad.

And he suspects nothing. I have had no chance to recover the paper yet."

There was no doubting her honesty. If ever Truth came up from her well to peer through a woman's eyes she was there looking at the man, in the person of Grace Merridale. Wentworth felt his doubts slipping away, and in their place came the old longing to help her, though then his power to do so seemed slight enough.

"Where are they—your uncle and Planet?" he asked, looking at his watch. There were fifteen minutes left; perhaps Bunsen was already on the pier.

"On deck—with their heads together. Planet is ill—from the way you treated him. They did not see you. I—I was looking for you. I thought you might—"

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know. Home, presumably; but I shall go wherever he goes—until I have that which is mine. I think he wishes to be rid of me now. I think he would desert me if he could—or dared."

"And Planet?"

"Desert me? Oh, no! He—" She stopped and a vivid blush took the place of words. Wentworth snapped the case of his watch with unnecessary vigor, and his voice, which had softened, again became cold.

"It is to be hoped that your uncle doesn't abuse you?"

"No, he would not dare."

"I see. Of course not. José Planet would protect you."

Her lips parted at the change in his tone—a change of which he was hardly aware himself—and she looked at him as she quietly answered: "Of the two I would prefer my uncle's abuse to Planet's protection, Mr. Wentworth. I am in an extremely awkward position for a woman. Think what I have to contend with; think what I have to do, and do alone."

"If Bunsen gets here in time you will be relieved of the necessity. I have been unable to do much alone, myself. I was about to go to the captain when I met you."

"For what?"

"To get him to hold the vessel in case the warrant is delayed."

"It would be useless," the girl answered. "If the captain did not order you off the ship he would laugh at you. He and my uncle are friends of years' standing."

"Ah! then our hope lies in Bunsen getting here in time! You do not consider yourself in any danger?"

"No—unless they learn of my knowledge of what they have done. I don't dare to think of what might happen in that event. Bagshot is a desperate man—you know that. I think he might kill me—

kill us both—if he knew you were with me here. He would guess what it was for."

She put her hands to her face. Wentworth cursed himself for having doubted her, at the same time seeing how his presence in her state-room might compromise her. "Forgive me for jeopardizing your safety," he said. "I did not think. And—"

He was interrupted by the sound of a bell being rung in the passage, and a man shouted as he passed: "All ashore that's going ashore."

Wentworth turned to the door, leaving unfinished what he was about to say. "You will let me hear from you?" he asked.

"At the first chance. Probably from Galveston."

"Then Heaven send you luck, Miss Merridale. I cannot forgive myself that it is through my stupidity you are in this coil of circumstance. My interest in the matter is as great as yours. Good-bye."

He held out his hand. The girl took it, and as the young man looked into her eyes he saw both dread and appeal in them, but the smile she gave him was a brave one.

"I will do my best to win," she said briefly, and turned away.

Wentworth hurried back to the gangway in a frame of mind that would have made it unlucky for either Baghot or Planet to have met him then. Had he felt certain of non-interference he would have hurried to the upper deck, tackled the greater

villain of the two and dragged him ashore, but in an instant he recognized how nonsensical had been the idea. Yet, was he to stand by and see the man whom he believed to be the murderer of his father go scot-free? It looked so, and his spirit rebelled at the hopelessness of the situation.

And the girl! He was stirred by a feeling greater than pity—a feeling new to him—as he remembered the forlorn face that had seemed to appeal to him. And he had left her tied to two brutes. Would she be brave? Would she accomplish her end alone, or would her spirit fail her?

Though the warning to those going ashore had been sounded for some minutes Wentworth saw the gang-plank had not yet been removed; therefore he took his stand on the lower deck, near the gangway. From his station he could command a view of part of the pier and a stretch of the street along which he knew the detective would come. A line of trucks crawled over the hot highway, but no hurrying taxi-cab met his vision; no man on a run. Would Bunsen never come?

His mind swung from his business to the girl who, he thought, must now be feeling unutterably lonely. With his open watch in his hand he waited, his brain busy, but his mind a blank to his immediate surroundings. The bustling stevedores had now ceased their rush; a group of deck-hands were taking their stand at the falls of the great gangplank, and

the rattle of empty baggage-trucks trundled along the hollow pier was drowned in the strident roar of the escaping steam.

John glanced at his watch. The hour for sailing was already past, and he was suddenly hoping that the delay would be prolonged, when he was approached by an official in uniform.

"Are you a passenger, sir? If not, you have less than a minute to get ashore."

Wentworth looked up and realized that the time had come. He was brought suddenly to himself, and something within him protested at the interruption to his thoughts. He closed his watch and was about to move to the pier, when from an impulse which had no backing of reason or intention, and which allowed him no chance for consideration, he lounged to the bulwark, threw his arm along the broad rail, and assuming an attitude of careless ease, answered:

"I am a passenger, sir."

The officer turned away. "Haul out the gangplank!" he shouted above the thunder of escaping steam, and the next instant the heavy bridge swung clear of the deck. Not until then did Wentworth become fully conscious of what he had done. Even at that time he could have gained the pier-head by a vigorous leap, but he did not attempt it. It was a decidedly undreamed-of situation for the young man. It seemed to him that his act had been directed by some power outside of himself; indeed, so dazed

was he by his own unexpected determination, a determination having no recognized relation to a previous mental state, that he stood where the officer left him until the steamer had drawn well away from its berth. Even when he had fully realized what he had done, how unprepared for the situation he was, and how probably useless to himself or to the girl would be his quixotic attitude, he did not regret his act. Neither did he consider of his wisdom or foolishness. It did not take a deep analysis to discover why he had thrown himself into a path which, he knew well enough, might easily become dangerous—would certainly become so the moment he showed himself to the man to whom he was a threat and an open enemy.

Wentworth had no definite plan, but he knew that to make his purpose aboard anything more than an absurd farce a plan must be laid. The primary object, he thought, was to be the means of capturing his father's murderer; the secondary object, to follow and protect the lady, who, but a few hours before, he had mentally cursed as a false siren. However, be his design what it might, he recognized the fact that he must not have his presence known to Bagshot or to Planet until he had fixed upon some mode of procedure against them. He must obtain a room and conceal himself, and with a last, despairing look at the now deserted pier, and up the street, he turned and made his way to the purser's office. A moment

or two later he came to the hurried conclusion that he had been guided by the goddess of Good Fortune.

As he entered the small room, having met no one on his way there, a man was busy at the desk, but it was not the weak-faced clerk; he was absent. As the door opened and closed the man looked up.

"Do you wish to see me?"

"If you are the purser."

"Yes, sir, and—Why, hello, Wentworth! It is Wentworth, is it not? I didn't know you were with us!"

Wentworth looked at the man in surprise, then the light of recognition came to him. "Van Buskirk, by all that's holy!" he exclaimed, grasping the outstretched hand. "What are you doing here?"

"Purser here," said the other. "Went to Texas two years ago, you know. Knocked around hopeless for a spell, then through a pull, fastened on to this job. Been here a year. I'm glad to see one of the old class. How do you come to be aboard? Your name is not on my list."

"I know it; that's why I happened in. The Lord has delivered me into your hands! It is a streak of luck! Get me somewhere where I won't be seen until I have a talk with you."

The purser frowned. "You not seen! What's the matter? Male or female?"

"You are still the same kind of an ass you always were in college, Van," said Wentworth, good na-

turedly. "The matter is serious but not yet tragic. Do as I ask you. I'll tell you about it later."

The purser looked closely at his old classmate, and saw there was something more than banter in the demand. Without further words he opened a door. "Go right into my room," he said. "I'll be with you when I can get a breath of freedom from this business."

Wentworth entered at once. The purser closed the door behind him. "Lord!" he ejaculated, as he sat down again. "Wentworth doing a dodge! Wentworth—of all men!"

But two hours later he had heard his old college-mate's story, or as much of it as the young man thought advisable to give him. Of the murder of his father he made no mention, confining himself to the theft of the paper, though he did not tell its character. In fact, he made his presence appear to be the result of a chivalrous impulse inasmuch as he allowed it to be inferred that he was acting more in behalf of Grace Merridale than for himself.

"What I wish," he said finally, "is to keep concealed from Bagshot and Planet; not that I fear them, but it would put the lady in a bad position, and make her efforts useless if they knew we had anything in common. I wish their arrest."

"Naturally—but how will you accomplish it?"

"You are fixed with wireless? It's the law, I believe."

"Yes."

"Then perhaps messages can be sent from here to the New York police, and an order returned authorizing the captain to hold the criminal. You see—"

"My dear fellow, it is you who don't see," interrupted the impressed purser, laying a hand on his friend's knee. "No question or message goes to or from this vessel without the captain's knowledge. And Shearpole? Not on your life, John! You say you have no warrant; then you are crippled. Captain Shearpole and Bagshot are as thick as thieves. They were at sea together years ago, when Bagshot did the act I'm doing, aboard this *Lone Star*. He always goes and comes with Shearpole. No, Jack, you won't catch them that way; the captain would be more likely to block your game than block Bagshot's. Your man, Bunsen, don't know you are aboard? don't even know for certain that Bagshot is?"

"I suppose not—unless he gets the list. He knows nothing of my being here, that's certain."

"Ah! And not finding you he'll be likely to let the matter drop—as you will appear to him to have done! Let me think." The purser rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I don't see a hole out!" he finally said. "If you telegraph the police the captain must know of your being aboard; then the whole ship would know, and you would be in the

soup. Bagshot will hatch up a story. Shearpole will raise hell—and how will you come out? It's an easy conundrum. I would advise you to let wireless alone, Jack."

"You are a Job's comforter, for sure, Van."

"Well, not altogether, I think. It is more than likely that Bunsen will telegraph orders to Galveston and have your friend nabbed when he steps ashore. That would be better than warning them ahead of time. There are more or less relations between the police forces of the two cities, while the captain of a ship is an uncertain quantity."

"That's a fairly brilliant idea," said Wentworth. He had been depressed by the outlook, but the purser's suggestion appeared logical.

"And it is necessary that you keep out of sight; I see that," continued Van Buskirk, cheerfully. "All I can do for you is to give you a room. Of course, you pay your passage—you are not a stowaway. If you haven't the money I'll let you have it."

"Thanks, I have sufficient."

"All right! You can play sick; be an invalid, you know, and I'll see that your meals are served in your stateroom. At night, you can go out for air and exercise. I'll share my clothes with you, we being about a size, and in a uniform cap I don't think they would catch on to you if they saw you, especially in the evening. I dare do no more than this; I don't wish to be ruined. At Galveston you

can consult with the authorities. Shall I let the lady know you are aboard?"

"No," returned Wentworth, "I believe I can manage that when I am ready."

"I'll warrant it—for a million," returned the other, laughing and thrusting his tongue into his cheek. "Come, I'll get you settled away from Bagshot, and then send you in some clothes and some supper. You must be nearly starved. I know I am."

While Wentworth, in the secrecy of his cabin, was eating his first meal on board the *Lone Star*, he had one source of satisfaction and one hope. First, that he would see the girl again and mark the surprised pleasure on her face; and, second, that the astute Bunsen, when he arrived at the pier and found the steamer gone, would telegraph to Galveston and have the criminals arrested on their landing. It was bright of Van Buskirk to have foreseen that—but then, Van had always been bright enough, and faithful to his friends. He should be rewarded.

And on landing he, the outraged Wentworth, would be on hand as a witness and identifier. He knew that unindicted criminals were often caught by means of the telegraph, though just how it would be in Bagshot's case he could not feel certain; but he would be there; and he now saw that it was well that he had obeyed the impulse to remain aboard.

He sat back in satisfaction, and, taking out a cigar, sent its smoke to tangle among his dreams of the future, not knowing that almost directly across the now heaving vessel in her cabin Grace Merridale was also dreaming dreams not so roscate.

Neither did he know that at the very moment he was thus heartening himself Bunsen was lying in a hospital in a dazed and half-conscious condition. That individual had hurriedly closed the taxicab door on Wentworth, given his card to the chauffeur, rushed into the court-house and up the long stairway, two steps at a time, on his way to the office of the district-attorney. Once there he knew how to make the wheels run rapidly for himself.

As he reached the head of the broad stairs the green baize doors of the hall were dashed open and a hurrying messenger drove into him at full speed, knocking him backward, and together the two had rolled down the steps.

The messenger was not badly injured, but Bunsen lay unconscious and was at once hurried to the Hudson Street Hospital. The fates were not yet ready to smile on Mr. John Wentworth.

## CHAPTER XII

### A CLIMAX

THAT evening, clad in dark clothes, and with a yachting cap borrowed from the purser, John went on deck. He had hoped and expected that at least he would have a sight of Miss Merridale, but in this he was disappointed; a strong wind was blowing from the south, and the ship, driving into it, gave the air the force of a whole gale. It was very damp, too, and the deck so unpleasant as to be almost deserted; to the young man it was evident that the girl preferred the comfort and solitude of her stateroom.

But he faced the strong wind, striding up and down and thinking of the consternation caused by his sudden and unexplained absence from his studio. Neither Harper nor Thomas could have any knowledge of his whereabouts, or even of his safety, and it would be impracticable to communicate with either in less than a week. Bunsen, he thought, would be bright enough to understand his absence, but the others might be possessed by the idea of foul play, and so arouse the police to action.

"A fine mess I've made of the whole thing, from the beginning up to date!" he muttered to himself, halting in his walk and rewrapping the leaf of his cigar, which was glowing in the wind as though it would burst into flame. As he did so, and saw the uselessness of smoking in such a rush of air, a figure emerged from the shadow of a sheltered nook and accosted him.

"May I beg a little fire, sir? One can't light a match in this cursed draft."

With a glance Wentworth recognized the man.

It was Bagshot. There was no mistaking his figure, his Southern accent, or the quality of his voice, though the gloom was too deep to allow more than the outline of his features to be seen. John did not start. He knew his own identity was not suspected, and, without speaking, he tendered his half-consumed cigar.

But he watched the face of the other as it was faintly illumined by the fitful glow of the fire. It was hard and ugly, and there was a two days' growth of gray stubble on the square chin, while the lines under the small gray eyes were dark. It was the countenance of a tired and worried man.

The cigar was returned with a gruff "Thanks," and with a stiff bend of the body, Bagshot went back to his shelter. Without a return of the salutation Wentworth threw the remains of the cigar over the rail, and to avoid the appearance of sudden retreat

he took two or three more turns up and down the deck, his eye open for Planet. But Planet was not in sight. Wentworth returned to his quarters, and for a moment was tempted to do a foolish thing: find and force the door of Bagshot's stateroom and search it for the red paper; but when he stopped and considered that the Mexican might be there, and that in all probability his enemy carried the precious document on his person, he saw both the uselessness and danger of such an attempt.

The following two days were stormy, and so boisterous that the deck was untenantable. Night and day Wentworth remained in his room, lonely save for the infrequent visits of the purser, and beset by *ennui* and discouragement, though he was not seasick, being too hardened a yachtsman for that weakness.

The fourth night out was ideal. The sea had gone down and the soft, warm wind bore a hint of the tropics the vessel was approaching. There was no moon, but the stars were bright, their light glinting from the tops of the burnished swells, though barely illuminating the black sea. It was a night for romance and adventure, a night for music and languor—for love and lovers.

Hot, impatient of himself and thoroughly disgruntled with life, and these from a cause he had not attempted to analyze, Wentworth went on deck as soon as it became fairly dark. The change of

weather and the steadiness of the ship had brought nearly every passenger from below, and Wentworth had not made half the tour of the deck when he saw the subject of most of his thoughts sitting on the starboard side, near the main stairway, and at some distance from the chattering group of convalescents. The girl was alone, her head resting on one hand as she reclined in a steamer-chair. In the reflected light from the saloon her face showed very pale, while both attitude and expression spoke of lowness of spirits. She did not notice the tall young fellow who passed her, nor did he attempt to attract her attention; just then he dared not; he first wished to see if the coast was clear.

Wentworth did not find Bagshot or his henchman, though he looked sharply as he went around the deck. By then he was keyed up, though he held himself at apparent poise, and as he completed the round of the vessel's deck he flung away the remains of his cigar and approached the lady.

"Miss Merridale."

At the sound of her name uttered by a stranger the girl looked up quickly, then she leaned forward, her lips parted, her eyes very wide. She might have sat for a model of Consternation. Wentworth was at her side in an instant.

"Pardon me. I was inconsiderate to startle you so," he said softly. She turned and looked at him, her eyes glowing, her hands clasped over her bosom.

"You! You! What are you doing here?" The voice was barely above a whisper.

"I hardly know, myself," said Wentworth, attempting a light laugh. "Only I am here. At the last minute my spirit protested. I could not leave you alone. I—I stayed to help you."

"I—I am glad I did not know it. I should have forbidden you."

"Why?"

"Not that I do not appreciate what you would do for me. You were good to think of me, but—but you will only make matters worse! Mr. Wentworth, you must not stay here, by me. He is coming up in a moment. Don't let him see you! Think of what might happen!"

"I feel reasonably secure for the present; it is for you I am anxious. Is there anything new?"

"Nothing. I have been sick in body and heart. Oh, do go."

"How is our mutual friend and admirer, José?"

"He is sick, also, I understand. Oh, Mr. Wentworth, please go." The voice was low and pleading; the girl was on the verge of panic, but, man-like, Wentworth looked upon her state as an additional attraction. It would not be fair to state that he realized the extent of her suffering, but it was novel, and something more than merely pleasing for him to be begged for anything by a pretty woman—or

by that pretty woman. He did not make a move to leave her.

"And am I never to see you? Am I not to be considered?" he asked.

"Not considered? Considering you is what I am doing! What more can I do? Please—please—" She stood up and laid a hand on his arm. "Won't you give me time to think?"

"Let me think for you," returned the man, with a sudden passion he did not understand—that was strange to him. "I'll swear no harm shall come to you. As for myself, I have no fear."

"Don't! Don't talk so!" she implored. "If—I will find a way to meet you—when we can be safer. Where is your room?"

"Number thirty-nine—near yours."

"Oh, how have you dared? How have you dared? And for me!"

"For you. And I will see you. I must."

"Perhaps, but no longer now—"

"How long must I wait?"

"Until you hear from me."

"It will be soon?"

"Soon." She held out both hands to him to urge him from her, and now her face was animated. Wentworth, now well launched on what to him was an unknown sea, caught one of her hands and was about to raise it to her lips when he saw her look directed to something behind him, and her eyes widen with

fear. He dropped the lax fingers and turned to see Bagshot step through the door of the companionway.

That individual was smiling broadly—a smile that suggested his having for some time enjoyed a sight of the two, though to have heard a word through the intervening distance would have been impossible. He walked directly to the young man.

“How do you do, Mr. Wentworth?”

The tone was that of easy friendship; there was neither anger nor astonishment in it. To all appearances here was the casual meeting of two acquaintances. The girl buried her face in her hands.

“You had better retire to your stateroom, my dear,” said Bagshot smoothly, though there was a sinister ring in his voice. “I think I can entertain this gentleman.”

## CHAPTER XIII

### AN OPEN GAME

IT cannot be said that Wentworth held a perfect mental poise as he realized the situation, but if he had a sense of absolute consternation, he was overcome but for a brief instant, and failed to show it in either face or bearing. With a quick appreciation of the fact that Bagshot could not know of the extent of his intimacy with the girl, he ignored the hypocrisy of the extended hand and addressed the lady as she started to turn away.

"I trust, madam, you will pardon my effrontery. My plea is that I have seen you once before in your father's house. I hope to have the pleasure of seeing you again."

"You are excusable, perhaps, under the circumstances," returned the girl, grasping at self-control, and on the instant following the lead she was given. "You took me at a disadvantage. I was startled. Good-evening, sir."

She bowed gracefully and left the two men together, carrying herself proudly until she reached her state-room. In its seclusion she dropped on the cushioned

locker and, burying her face in her hands, broke into a paroxysm of subdued sobs.

On deck Wentworth and Bagshot stood looking at each other for a moment, neither speaking. Presently the latter broke the silence.

“Do you take me for a fool, sir?”

The interim had given the younger man time to collect himself. The success of his interview with the lady, and the easy way they had pulled the wool over the eyes of Bagshot, made his position so assured in his own mind that he felt almost jocular as he answered:

“That is a question admitting of argument, Mr. Bagshot, or Merridale—Bagshot. It is said that every man is a fool for being dishonest or criminal. On that basis I must think you a fool, for you certainly are a villain.”

The other did not appear to be offended at this plain speech which brought him to a stop. A moment or two intervened, then, grasping a deck stanchion, he leaned against it and said: “You don’t mince your words, sir. You certainly are honest in that regard. What do you expect to do on board this vessel?”

“That is strictly my affair,” said Wentworth, taking a fresh cigar from his pocket and carefully cutting off the end. He had himself well in hand by then, and he made up his mind to protect the girl at any cost to himself.

“However,” he continued, taking a match from a

gold box and affecting a carelessness he was far from feeling as he lighted the perfecto, "I am so far impressed by your tribute to my honesty that I will continue to be plain. I called you a villain. You are a liar, as well. If you are that lady's father, her name cannot be Merridale. If she is not your daughter, I congratulate her."

"And how did you come to know my name?" asked the other, biting his lip.

"That is my business."

Bagshot forced a laugh as he took a cigar from his own pocket, lighting it. "You certainly are a man of parts, Mr. Wentworth! I admire you! I wish I could enlist you! Let us talk plainly a moment. You have followed me for a purpose; that purpose is connected with a certain paper.

"That paper was, and is, mine—at least as much mine as yours, and Grace Merridale stands nearer to me than to you."

"How much nearer?"

"That is my business." The return was made with an air of great satisfaction. Wentworth was vexed at having laid himself open to his enemy, even in a fence with words. Bagshot continued: "You had no warrant in law for holding that paper. You assaulted me, not I you. The law you would like to invoke would protect me and not you. I have the paper and, therefore, possess nine points in our contest. What can you do about it?"

Notwithstanding that his gorge was rising against this bare sophistry, and the last question did nothing to allay his anger, Wentworth felt relieved inasmuch as it was fairly plain that Bagshot did not suspect the girl.

"I confess that I came here to shake the paper out of you." said the young man. "But I came too late. As for being here now—I was carried off by accident."

Bagshot grinned in his face. "And you still take me for a fool. You had some other reason. What is it?"

"Again, that is my business."

"Which answer is an acknowledgment of the fact as I stated it. What is the use of our fencing like little boys with reeds? Come, sir! Can we not compromise? If you will drop your absurd position regarding the thing called honor, and join me, I will make you fabulously rich. Can we not do it? I think so. I need a man like you."

Wentworth had been holding himself in check, and to avoid boiling over at sight of the man by his side he turned and looked out over the dark sea that rolled under and gently heaved the vessel. But at Bagshot's infamous proposition to compromise with him he lost hold of both temper and discretion, and wheeled on the Southerner.

"What, sir! Do you propose that I sell out at the expense of Grace Merridale and the honor you sneer

at? Listen to me: I would as soon compromise with the devil himself! I know you, sir, from the soles of your feet to the top of your foul head. You are right in thinking I am here for some purpose other than to obtain possession of a map that may or may not be worthless, and in which I have no interest. Have you taken me for a cursed idiot?"

"Perhaps you are something of a villain yourself," was the angry retort. "Would you be so hot on my trail if I had not a handsome daughter? Or, do you aim at thanks and a more tangible reward from Grace Merridale? If not, why are you here?"

Wentworth's spleen rose high at the sneer at himself, and higher at the thinly covered insult to the lady. If he needed proof that Grace Merridale was not this man's daughter it was furnished by Bagshot's innuendo against her. Throwing every consideration to the wind, Wentworth took a step nearer the man, holding on to the upright stanchion, and in a low voice, he said: "Sir, have you even no regard for a lady's reputation? You ask me what I am here for. Well, Mr. Simeon Bagshot, I am here that I may see you arrested when you set foot in Galveston—arrested, not as a mere thief, but as a murderer."

"Murder!" exclaimed Bagshot, straightening himself and suddenly losing the sardonic grin he had put on when Wentworth began his tirade.

"Ay, murder! And had this vessel been delayed ten minutes you would now be in the Tombs!"

In the uncertain light Wentworth could see the man's complexion change, its normal ruddiness giving place to pallor, while the cigar he had been smoking fell from his lips unnoticed.

"You are crazy!" said Bagshot; but the protest was neither loud nor strong.

"Comfort your soul that way, if you can," was the retort. "I keep my hands from you now, but if I did not live in the hope of justice, I'd throw you over the rail—if I had to swing for it."

"Listen to me! You are the last man my father ever saw in this world. You threatened to murder him. Outside of his house, Planet—your veritable satellite, stood watching. I saw him; he spoke to me. Now you know me, sir, and as Heaven is my witness, I'll follow you to the crack of doom to bring you to your just deserts!"

Wentworth delivered this forcibly, being well-nigh beside himself, and as he saw the effect of the shot he had fired, he at once regretted it. He knew he had accomplished no more than to put his enemy on his guard.

For all his powers of self-control this blow was more than Bagshot could stand. However, the gloom hid much of his emotion from Wentworth; it hid the palpable shaking of the man's knees, if not the nervous working of his face. He still had

hold of the deck stanchion, else he might have fallen, and he stood, not daring to let go, for a moment unable to speak. But he was not the man to run tamely from any field. After a space of silence he recovered a measure of self-control, sufficient, at least, to enable him to use his voice.

"I—I confess you staggered me, Mr. Wentworth," he began, with an attempt at lightness of manner. "No man listens to a charge of—to such a charge unmoved. But your bluff is nonsensical! I grant you may have reason to feel hard toward me—as I have got the better of you—but as a threat you are not a success. A gentleman of my standing is not to be fazed by one of your stamp. Sir, your father died of heart disease. Even the police say there was no—no murder. I understand you now. You have played your card, but you have yet to see mine. Good-night, sir."

Without risking a return from the other he pulled himself upright and walked off with an attempt at jauntiness and a wave of his fat hand.

But the words and act did not deceive Wentworth, who remained looking at the door through which Bagshot disappeared. "I have rather overleaped the matter," he mused; "but I have given that fellow a shot under his water-line and what have I gained? Not a damn thing but to put myself in danger. For Bagshot is not the man to let me alone after this. Hereafter, I think I had better not

expose myself after dark; the water is cursedly deep here!"

He finished his cigar in silent cogitation, tossed the end over the rail and turned in, carefully locking his stateroom-door. For the first time in his life he wished he carried a revolver.

## CHAPTER XIV

### BAGSHOT'S FIRST MOVE

**B**AGSHOT was a shaken man, and looked it as he went down the broad companion steps on the way to Planet's stateroom. But he was a man of resource—a man who dies hard. His lip was bleeding where he had bitten it, and the color had not returned to his face as he entered his henchman's well-lighted quarters. Planet lay in his bunk, weak, yellow and nerveless. The Mexican was not a good sailor.

"What ees eet?" the sick man asked as he saw the other's face.

"What ees eet!" was the mocking return. "I have just met Wentworth—that ees eet."

"Heem! Here!" The Mexican started to his elbow.

"Yes—heem is here," was the scornful answer. "He came aboard—and stayed aboard. He says he was carried off by accident."

"Hell!" Planet fell back on his pillow. For a moment there was silence while Bagshot looked at

the more than perplexed invalid, but it was the Mexican who broke the silence.

"You haf blood on your mout!" Did he--"

"Shut up! No! he didn't! Do you think I'd be ass enough to tackle him barehanded? It's worse than that! It's you who have made the trouble! He charges you with killing his father."

"*Mc!*"

The sallow man started up in his bunk so violently as to bring his head smartly against the upper berth. He fell back with a groan, his face filled with terror.

"Yes, you fool! You spoke to him that night. He remembers you. You never told me, you cursed greaser! Were you trying to hang both of us?"

"*Caramba!*" ejaculated the other feebly. "I ask the time—yes. But I know heem not! I walk away. I think you will nevair come! *Dios!* An' he remembair!"

"Yes, he remembers you. There is no proof—"

"I'll knife heem!" interrupted the Mexican. Bagshot strode to the bunk and shook his fist in the other's face.

"You'll keep out of sight!" he whispered. "Do what you like when we get ashore."

"Then, what—"

"Leave it to me. Do you suppose I'll risk any work of that sort here? Where's your sand?"

"Suppose he meet with the—Gra-ace?"

"He did meet her. He was talking with her. He kissed her hand."

As though he knew the effect of his words Bagshot smiled grimly as he spoke. The Mexican forgot his weakness and struggled from his bed. "He make the luf to her—to Gra-ace! I'll—"

"You'll do nothing," said Bagshot, grasping the man and forcing him back to his bunk. "You lift a finger to do what I forbid, and I'll give you the cold shake. Yes, by God! I'll prove that you killed old Wentworth, even though you didn't. Do you wish Grace to know the whole business? She shall see no more of his highness, even if I have to lock her up! I have enough to arrange without your bothering me and putting your foot into it. Shearpole will help us out if you don't make it impossible!"

"You know best!" said the Mexican contritely. "But I would like one more wr-r-restle with heem for the throat he put on me—for the insult."

"You may yet have your chance," said Bagshot, "But for now keep yourself scarce. Don't show yourself on deck. That's what I came here to tell you."

He washed the blood from his mouth and, with another warning to Planet, went out, taking his way to the captain's room.

Though there was now no reason for concealing himself, from prudential motives Wentworth con-

tinued taking his meals in his own room, and the hours of his exercise on deck were confined to daylight. Nor did he ever pass a gloomy corner without being alert against what might come from it. Of Bagshot he had less fear than of the wily Mexican whom he had not seen since coming on board the *Lone Star*; however, he knew Planet was on the vessel, and he rightly conjectured that if any foul play was put forward the plot would be laid by Bagshot and executed by his less astute henchman.

Therefore, never for a moment did he permit his sense of danger to slumber, though as time passed nothing happened to justify his fears. He did not confer with the purser, not deeming it advisable; he could see no way for Van Buskirk to help him.

The hours were monotonous, but the feeling that a climax would come on the vessel's arrival at Galveston kept Wentworth's feelings at a point well above depression, though not above a measure of worry. He thought it strange that his open appearance caused no comment from Captain Shearpole, who had passed him twice, but with hardly a second look at him, taking him, the young man thought, for one who wished to be exclusive, as he had not appeared at the public table. Once in the ensuing three days of the voyage he saw Bagshot, but that individual appeared to have his equanimity completely restored, for he grinned broadly as he caught

the young man's eye, disappearing immediately thereafter.

Though he waited and hoped and longed for a sight of the girl, Wentworth did not see her, and in consequence was troubled. For he was beginning to discern the truth, and, being honest with himself, had come to know that he had not taken his present position entirely in vindication of his honor and in the pursuit of his father's suspected murderer.

That he was in love with a girl he had seen but three times seemed monstrous to him, though the footing on which they stood made the conditions unusual. But so it was. Aside from considerations apart from the lady he knew he would follow her; he would help her; beyond that he had no plan, even in his secret thoughts. He desired to win her strong regard; anything beyond that appeared preposterous, though why it should he could not have told.

He wondered and worried, and continued to wonder and worry, planning nothing in detail. All he had determined upon was to keep his parties in sight, and the way to accomplish that seemed to present no difficulties. It would be simple. When they left the steamer he would follow, unless, indeed, as he hoped and believed, the criminal would be met by an officer of the law the moment the *Lone Star* reached her pier. In that event the lady would need his protection.

The island city of Galveston was reached just after

sunset, and, not greatly to Wentworth's surprise, the vessel dropped anchor. He knew something of the difficulties of navigation in the waters of that port, and the necessity of high tide in order that a steamer of the size of the *Lone Star* might crawl through the pass of the bar and reach her berth. He was puzzled by the fact that a deeply laden tramp steamer came out without difficulty, but he asked no questions though he could not understand the delay. He thought it a trifle strange, too, that the steamer had not been met and boarded by the Galveston police; but for a surety no police came.

The young man was not discontented at the prospect of a few hours' delay. He walked the deck breathing in the balmy and delightful air of the semi-tropics, soothed by its graciousness. The glittering lights of a great hotel on the sea-wall of the distant city stimulated his imagination. Though wealthy he had never traveled extensively, having but once gone over the treadmill of the "grand tour" of Europe with no great pleasure. He was far from being *blasé*; and now he promised himself that as soon as his pressing business was finished he would learn more of his own country. And he figured that this business would be over in the course of twenty-four hours.

Should he then return to New York? He could not answer that question; the haze of uncertainty veiled all beyond the capture of his father's murderer.

and the man who had robbed him of the red paper. Of course he would write to Harper and explain; otherwise, it made no difference to anyone where he was or how long he stayed.

He was in a rather complacent frame of mind when he went to his room early in order to be up by daylight. He undressed in the dark, and had hardly laid himself down when he was aroused by a knock. Springing from his bunk he opened the door, and it did not surprise him when Van Buskirk stepped inside. That individual appeared hurried, and his voice was perturbed.

"They are going to-night," whispered the purser. "Bagshot, Planet and Miss Merridale. I heard the captain give an order for the quarter-boat to be lowered for them at eleven o'clock. Bagshot's trunks are to be sent after him, but to where I don't know. You see the pull he has!"

Wentworth was thunderstruck, and his hand fairly shook as he lighted the cabin lamp. "The cursed villain! The miserable coward!" he exclaimed. "Would Captain Shearpole interfere if I went to him and told him the truth?"

"No, I think not. You remember what I said about their being old friends? He'd pretend not to believe you. He's a hot-headed specimen! Hello! Is this yours?"

The purser stooped and picked up a folded paper which from its position looked as if it might have

been thrust under the door. With a quick intuition as to its nature Wentworth opened it, catching a breath of the perfume with which it was scented and which he now knew so well.

*Have discovered we leave the steamer to-night. I have been unable to see you. He hardly lets me from his sight. Our first stop San Antonio, Menger Hotel. I will continue with him. There is nothing else for me to do. Will write when I get home. Heaven bless you, my friend, for all you have done for me.*

G. M.

Wentworth read and reread the note and then thrust it into the purser's hand.

"Doesn't that look like a bid to follow?" he asked excitedly.

"Looks more like hopelessness," said Van Buskirk. "Bagshot is giving you the slip, and will get clear! What are you going to do about it?"

"Do?" cried Wentworth, getting into his clothes with record haste. "If she has given up, I haven't. I'm going in that boat!"

"How will you manage it? I can't help you."

"I don't know how I will manage it, son; and I wouldn't tell you, if I did—it might compromise you. But I am going in that boat; if I fail I've had my trip for nothing—Bagshot will get away! Why are we lying off here instead of going up to the city?"

"I don't know. I hear something's gone wrong with the machinery and in fixing it we lose the tide

to take us through the pass. We won't berth till morning."

Wentworth stared at him. He thought he saw a great light. The purser went on: "The old man wigged me like the devil for not reporting you. I didn't dare tell him that you were a friend of mine or that Bagshot had been lying to him; only that you had come aboard on the last minute, paid your passage, and said you were sick and wished to be alone. Savvy? Don't give me away on your life, or you'll ruin me."

"Don't be afraid. What time is it?"

"Not yet nine o'clock."

"Where will the boat be lowered?"

"Amidship—on the port side."

"All right! Don't you get mixed up in this, Van. I can't tell you how I thank you! In the morning you are to know nothing about me, and—"

At that moment there sounded a smart knock. The purser retreated behind the berth curtain. John opened the door.

"I wish Mr. Wentworth," said a young officer whom Wentworth had never seen.

"I am he."

"Captain Shearpole wants to see you at once, sir—in his cabin."

"When? To-night?"

"At once, sir; if you please."

"Very good! Lead ahead," returned Wentworth,

seeing the necessity of giving the purser an opportunity to escape. That his call was in some way related to Bagshot he guessed. "Perhaps," he thought as he followed the quickly stepping officer, "perhaps Shearpole had reviewed the facts, and not wishing to become implicated in helping a criminal to escape, was about to put a few questions before Bagshot left the vessel.

Had Wentworth given the matter longer consideration he would have known his conclusion to be false. In a moment the two entered the captain's room.

Captain Shearpole was sitting at his desk when Wentworth was ushered in. He turned his hard, weather-beaten old face to the young man and motioned the escort to retire.

"You sent for me," said John, who had an idea that his chance for appeal had been forced upon him. The captain's frown deepened to a scowl.

"Who are you, sir? I fail to recognize you as a passenger."

"But I am a passenger," was the serene return.  
"My name is Wentworth."

"Oh! Your name is Wentworth, is it?" exclaimed Shearpole, with a well-defined sneer in his voice, as he squared himself and his eyes began to shine. "You are the sneak, hey! Why did you not come openly aboard my ship? Tell me that, sir."

Wentworth instantly saw the belligerent attitude

of the man and that there was no chance for him here. He had been about to unbosom himself, but the captain's tone and bearing sealed his lips, so far as his errand was concerned, for the time. It was not his move.

"I did not sneak aboard this vessel, sir. I came openly."

"You came openly, hey? Did you engage your passage and register as others do?"

"I did not."

"You did not! And why not, sir?"

"I refuse to be catechised," returned Wentworth. "I went to the purser and paid my way—paid it in full. There is no law—"

"Don't talk to me of law, young fellow," interrupted the other, hotly. "I know your kind! You came aboard for the purpose of importuning and pestering a lady—a friend of mine, and under my protection while aboard my vessel. You have followed her for weeks, sir. I know you! She wishes to be rid of you and your sort."

Wentworth was taken fair aback at this explosion. In the turn of affairs he saw the name of Bagshot written large, but he did not then lose his temper.

"You have been misinformed, Captain Shearpole," he returned. "I followed a criminal aboard this steamer. I was awaiting a warrant and was carried off by accident."

"You lie, sir! It was by no accident. You were

warned ashore—my officer told me so. Do you think I don't know what has been going on aboard my own ship?"

"Call it intention, then, sir, but certainly not premeditated. I stated I was following a criminal, and felt I was about to lose him."

"Ay? A criminal? And who?" The white eyebrows were raised as if in wonder.

"Simeon Bagshot, Captain Shearpole. He's a thief—and worse."

"I dare say—from your point of view. I am not surprised at you! Are you an officer of the law?"

"No, sir, but—"

"Damn your buts! You are a fraud—a liar, sir!" shouted the choleric old fellow, bringing his fist down on the desk with a bang. "Your story is poppycock! I know your history, and the base of your insulting charge. I know all about it. Bagshot a criminal—a thief! I have known him for thirty years!"

Wentworth was outraged, and his blood leaped to the boiling-point in an instant.

"Then I have learned him better in thirty hours!" he retorted with heat. "You have twice called me a liar without provocation—you shall answer for that. You also say that Miss Merridale complains of my importunity—that I have followed her for weeks. I have known her for less than nine days. I say you speak a falsehood. Does this look like

the result of importunity? Read this and be fair."

He pulled out the note he had just received and held it toward the captain.

"Curse you and your letters!" returned the old man, purple with rage, as with one hand he hammered on the gong on his desk and with the other waved off the proffered paper. He had been defied on board his own ship; he had been told that he lied; having called another a liar did not excuse this *lèse majesté*. He would show this upstart landsman what it meant to combat a sea-captain on his own vessel.

Before Wentworth could say more the call of the bell was answered by a man in the dress of a sailor, though that he was a petty official, or sub-officer of some kind, was indicated by the design on his sleeve. Shearpole pointed at Wentworth, and his washed-out blue eyes were blazing as he shouted: "Take that fellow out of here. Take him to his stateroom and see that he doesn't leave it without a guard." Then turning to his victim he said: "You'll not put foot on shore, sir, until we get back to New York. I'll show you, sir! I'll teach you to talk back to me. You need a trimming, and you'll get it."

Wentworth almost smiled as he saw how the man had let his anger blind him to the law; but he drew himself up and squarely faced the enraged official.

"Captain Shearpole," he said, "I demand a boat in order to leave this vessel. You give the privilege to others; it is mine as well. It is my right. You cannot hold me a prisoner; and you cannot return me to New York without it costing your company more than it would care to pay, and costing you your position. I think the latter will occur in any event."

Shearpole bounded to his feet.

"Do ye dare face me down! Off with ye, before I order ye ironed!"

The man who had come in touched John on the shoulder.

"Better come along. It will cost ye less in the end."

Wentworth was boiling, but he turned and left the cabin, afraid to remain lest he lose complete control of himself. He was more angry than he had ever been in his life, not alone because he had been thwarted, but because he hated injustice. That the captain was entrenched behind the law which made him king on his own vessel, he knew well enough, and that there was no immediate appeal from Shearpole's order made him the more desperate.

But whatever else had been accomplished he had not been tamed. When he reached his own room, his cheeks tingling from excitement, he found the sailor close behind him. "What are you going to do?" he asked.

"Goin' to obey orders," was the uncompromising

return. "Advise you not to cut up rough. Won't do the the least good. Perhaps in the mornin' the old man'll feel different, but he's pretty mad now."

"Suppose I refuse to go into my room?"

"Then I'll call help to put ye there. Can't say I wants to handle you alone! Better take it easy, sir. Less harm will come of it."

With a glance Wentworth sized up the man. Undoubtedly he could handle him if it came to a fight, but there seemed little to be gained in that save to make another enemy. He turned and entered his room, barely crossing the threshold when the door was closed and the key turned in the lock. He looked behind the curtains. Van Buskirk was gone, as he had hoped and expected.

And he had told the purser that he was going in the boat. It looked to be a vain boast now. He sat on the edge of his bunk and tried to calm himself, though every now and then his wrath blazed up against the high-handed proceedings of Captain Shearpole. He determined that once back in New York he would bring that individual to book for the outrage put upon him, even if it took every dollar he possessed. Angry men are apt to build the Castle of Revenge high and without regard to cost; but Wentworth meant it, though he did not dream how far Shearpole's act would sink into insignificance in the future.

But just then it was a dominating influence. To

Wentworth it was now clear that his detention in his cabin was a prearranged plan to prevent his being on deck and protesting when Bagshot went ashore. Justice had not entered into the matter and the animus was plain: Bagshot was afraid of him and had enlisted the captain in his behalf, the latter trumping up a lame excuse to hold him; doubtless he would be freed as soon as the boat left the ship.

But then it would be too late! Was there no way out? There must be! A fire must be met with fire when all other modes of protection are gone. Wentworth sat himself down to dispassionate thought.

And presently he hit upon an idea of escape—an escape which might allow him to carry out his original intention, though he rather quailed at the necessity it involved. It came to him like a flash; it would be his only and last chance. If Bagshot went ashore without him he might as well throw up his hands, and John Wentworth, for all his debonair nature, was not one to admit defeat until it was unquestionable.

He looked at his watch. It was but a few minutes after nine o'clock, and he had loads of time to spare for his purpose; the boat would not go until eleven. He set about making his preparations silently, and, when these were completed, calmly lay down in his bunk.

At quarter past ten he got up, relighted his lamp,

and began furthering his plan by knocking on the locked door. The immediate answer from the man outside showed that the guard's vigilence had not relaxed. "What do you want, sir," was the respectful inquiry.

"I wish something to drink. It is hell in here! Get anything you can."

"Can't think of it, sir."

"Why not? Am I ordered to be famished? I'll pay you well."

"An' you wont break out if I go for ye?"

"What would be the use?" returned Wentworth. "No, I wont break out, nor try to. I'll swear to be here when you come back. Unlock the door and I'll give you the money."

The man outside mumbled, but the temptation was too great. The door was unlocked and through the little opening made a bill was passed out; then the door was locked again. Wentworth's pulse began to rise as he heard the man go down the passage; he breathed a sigh of relief; he had feared absolute refusal.

Presently the guard appeared, bringing with him a bottle of champagne and a glass on a tray. He entered, locking the door after him but leaving the key in its place, then he set the tray on the locker.

"Glad to see you be calmin' down, sir," he said. "I make no doubt that the old man will let up on you after a night's sleep."

"Like as not," returned Wentworth. His parole was over; he might have run out then, and with honor, but the hue and cry which would arise after him made such a proceeding foolhardy. "Keep the change, my lad," he said to the man, who was fingering a handful of silver. "I find you a chap who obeys orders—obeys them strictly. One cannot be blamed for looking after their own interests, can they?"

"No, sir. That's what! Now I couldn't ha' blamed you if you had cut up rough."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," said the young man, taking a deep breath. "Pull that cork for me, will you? And you will join me?"

"Sure, sir!" said the man, with alacrity taking up the bottle.

"And I kept my promise to you, you see! I am here?"

"Thank you, sir. Yes, sir."

"Well, I am going now. Good-night."

He stepped toward the door. As he made the latter move, the guard, his hands trammelled by the bottle, sprang for him, but as this was just what the young man looked for, he was prepared. Turning in time to meet him, he landed a straight shoulder blow squarely between the man's eyes, and the fellow went down without a sound.

Then Wentworth hurried. Locking the door, he made a gag of a towel and stuffed into the mouth of

the fallen man, binding it in place with another towel. He quickly followed this up by tying his victim's hands and feet with the sheet he had torn in strips, and being sure the sailor was secure, he walked out of the room, locking the door behind him and putting the key in his pocket. In a moment he was on deck concealed by a deep shadow.

## CHAPTER XV

### CHECK

EVERYTHING was very quiet. Two or three passengers were seated in their chairs enjoying the warm air, the rest being below gathering their belongings to be prepared for an early landing in the morning. Wentworth made his way amidships and took station on the starboard side of the vessel, but well out of sight of the casual passer.

Forward the anchor-light glowed, repeated on every hand from the ships about the *Lone Star*, but the anchor-watch was the only figure he could see, the man moving across the steamer on his walk on the elevated forecastle. From his point of vantage Wentworth marked that the side-steps had been shipped into place. He had not waited long when some sailors, directed by an officer, lowered the quarter-boat, which was taken to the steps, and two men came up from her, disappearing forward. He waited until they had gone, then lounged carelessly to the side and looked over. He had hoped to find the boat empty, but saw that in it was a negro

sailor holding it off from the steamer's side with a boat-hook. He must take some risk; here was his best chance. Going easily down the steps he accosted the negro, speaking low.

"This is the boat that is to take a party ashore, I believe."

"Yaas, sah."

"Well, I wish to go in her."

"I dunno, sah; I'll—"

"Hush! There's a lady going?"

"Yaas, sah, an' two gemmen."

"That's right. Here, take this. It's the lady—you understand?"

The negro hesitated as he felt the crispness of the bill John thrust into his hand. Then he chuckled, his teeth showing white in the starlight.

"Guess I kin fix it, sah! Thankee, sah! Yo' jes' lie low forward an' nobody won't see you. I's de bowman, sah. Hurry, sah; here comes de crew! I fix it. Wish yo' luck, sah."

Wentworth scrambled forward over the thwarts, whisking off his hat that it might not make him conspicuous, and crouched close to the stem of the commodious craft. Four men came down the steps; for a moment the negro whispered to them, then they took their places, laughing among themselves. A few moments later an officer followed; after that was a wait.

The passing time seemed hours. Wentworth's

undignified position was bearing hard on him, and he recognized how foolish he had been in exposing his hand to Bagshot. If he were discovered now he had little doubt that more than his dignity would suffer; the man in his cabin would be found, and that would mean irons, and with some show of justice. Why had he not bettered his chances by pretending to fall in with Bagshot's wishes as expressed in his last interview? Why had he not compromised—and bided his time?

The sea heaved softly. The gulf-wind had fallen to less than a breath. A mile away lay the city seemingly afloat on the water. Presently there was the sound of footsteps clearly heard through the otherwise absolute silence, and then the light rustle of a skirt. A few words were spoken, then came footfalls on the stairs and the frail craft tipped as the passengers came aboard. Then there was a rattling of falling oars, an order, a swish of water and the boat left the steamer's side. As it got under way plainly came a voice from the deck:

"Good-night and good luck." It was the voice of Captain Shearpole.

Undoubtedly the negro bowman had explained the situation to his fellows, but there was no evidence that the stowaway's presence was known as the boat moved rapidly shoreward. When it was well away from the vessel the prostrate man, half under the forward thwart, breathed freely. He now had

little fear for the future, and he even raised his head that he might look aft under the arms of the swaying crew. Among the passengers not a word was spoken until the loaded boat had rounded the end of the city and was in the bayou behind it. Then it was that Wentworth heard Bagshot's voice as he spoke to the officer in command.

"Our train does not go until one-thirty, Mr. Pierce. It is now about half past eleven. If you are not pressed for time, come up to the hotel with us. I will show you I appreciate the trouble you have taken."

"Don't mention the trouble, sir."

"But I feel it; we all feel it! Did—er—did the captain tell you what he did with that impudent party?"

"Has him under lock and key, I understand. He narrowly escaped being ironed."

"Ah! Tamed him, hey?"

"I believe so. I heard little. Who is he? What did he do?"

"Excuse me, sir; but it is a delicate subject to mention—before a lady. I will tell you later. You will come with us?"

"Thanks. I don't mind—for half an hour."

A moment after the boat swept to the landing stage with its steps leading to the level above. It took but a few minutes for the passengers to disembark, the officer following after telling his men to

await his return. As the party got well away the negro turned and touched Wentworth, who had curled into the smallest compass possible for one of his figure.

"Now's yo' chance, sah! Coast all clear! Slick as a whistle, that was! I'd resk it fo' a gal any time!"

He laughed openly, his ivories gleaming. Wentworth slipped another bill into the man's hand. "Many thanks to you. Divide that among the rest," he said, and jumping across the float he ran up the steps.

But the steps were slippery, and in his haste he missed his footing, barely escaping a fall, his coat catching on the staple of an unseen mooring-ring driven into the sea-wall. Recovering himself he tore loose his coat and ran up in time to see the objects of his chase going across the broad esplanade.

In the comparative desertion of the shipping-front it was easy to keep the party in sight, and he followed them among the piles of recently discharged cargoes, and past the now gloomy warehouses, until they came to the hotel and entered.

But Wentworth did not go in after them. He passed on, inquiring his way to the depot. It was not a long walk. At that hour the waiting-room was empty and the ticket window closed, but a time-table on the wall showed him there was a train bound west at one-thirty. He was satisfied, though he hardly knew, why, except that he now had time

to do what he wished; and pushing straight to his object he at once hunted up the police headquarters.

The man dozing at his desk in the palace of justice opened wide his eyes as he took in the character of his visitor, and in answer to the question if a telegram relating to the arrest of a criminal from New York had been received, replied that he thought not—he would look up the record. It took him some time to do this, with the result that he discovered that no requisition for the arrest of anyone for any crime had been sent from New York.

"Not within a week?" asked Wentworth, a feeling of total defeat stealing over him.

"Not within two months, sir. The crooks give us a wide berth, now-a-days. What's the trouble?"

"And you would make no arrest on my affidavit?"

"Crime committed here?"

"No."

"Then not without a warrant, sir—or unless you are an officer. Don't you see how people with a petty spite might make an instrument of the police, if that were possible? I will do all I can for you but you had better take your case before a judge to-morrow, or go to the district attorney."

"It will then be too late."

"Is it a personal matter with you? that is, have you had trouble with the er—so-called criminal?"

"Yes."

The official shook his shoulders. "I reckon I can see through a ladder. No, Mister, I don't find I can act. Good-night, sir."

The man picked up a newspaper and settled himself to read. Wentworth turned away more in self-disgust than in anger. There would be but little use in explaining the situation; he knew that no steps could be taken on his bare word. He had a weak case. He had depended upon Bunsen, and Bunsen had gone back on him. He must either think of something else, or throw up his hands.

And it did not take him long to decide what he would do. The magnet of desire pulled him strongly. He would follow the girl for her own sake, hoping to see her, to get one more word with her, at least to let her know of his escape and that he would be within call if help were needed. He was up to his neck now; he would plunge in beyond his depth and see what came of it. In short, Wentworth made up his mind to follow the party to San Antonio; from there he would write to Harper, and telegraph for money as his finances would be too low to permit of his traveling further—even too low to allow his return to New York. He settled this much in his walk back to the depot, and again there he took his station outside and at a point from which he could see anyone who entered.

He had not long to wait. He saw the trio drive up in a public hack, and saw Bagshot buy the tickets. There was now a sprinkling of waiting passengers but no great throng. The girl and Planet stood on the platform until Bagshot joined them. Wentworth watched the three as they started to go aboard the newly made up train lying on the main track, its locomotive sending a plume of steam far up into the windless air. Then he entered the station by a rear door and went up to the ticket window.

"To San Antonio," he said. "Can I get a sleeper?"

"Obtain sleeping accommodations on the train, sir. There's loads of room," was the answer, as the tickets were pushed out. "Seven fifty, sir."

Wentworth put his hand in his breast pocket but drew it out as if stung. His wallet was gone. In his bewilderment he went over his clothing in the wild way one does under like circumstances, only to discover that he had not misplaced it.

For a moment he thought he had been robbed, then quickly recollected that he had been near no one who would rob him since he had the wallet in his hand when he bribed the negro to let him enter the boat. But there was the fact; his wallet, with over two hundred dollars in it, was gone. The agent looked at him sharply.

"What's the matter?"

"I have lost or misplaced my pocketbook," said

John, gathering his wits. "I'm afraid I'll have to wait until to-morrow."

It was a terrific blow. He turned from the window, his heart thumping as he realized that his plans had received a stunning reversal; moreover, that he was two thousand miles from home, a stranger in a strange land, dead broke, and that the man he hated and the girl he loved were even then beyond his reach.

At that moment the cry of "All aboard!" sounded from without. Something like desperation seized Wentworth. At all events his next act was without thought. Running from the depot he caught sight of Miss Merridale entering a car, Bagshot and Planet being close behind her, both carrying valises. Dashing past the guard at the gate he ran to the forward end of the car and jumped aboard, entering and walking down the passage just as the party he dogged were taking seats in the almost empty Pullman.

At that moment the train began to move

It was plain that neither Miss Merridale nor Planet took any notice of the hurrying man, the latter being engaged in storing baggage while the former was adjusting her hat at a narrow mirror between the windows. But Bagshot saw him. With something like an exclamation the man dropped the bag he was carrying and sank into the nearest chair, his eyes opening in mingled wonder and horror. He had thought of his persecutor as safely under

lock and key aboard the *Lone Star*, yet here he was in the flesh—if he was flesh. His mental attitude was too plain to be misread.

When Wentworth boarded the train he had but a hazy idea of speaking a word to the girl and hurling defiance at her uncle, but as he saw the effect his mere presence had created on the latter, and realized the train was drawing from the station, he changed his tactics. There was no time for words. Without halting he raised his hand and pointed a menacing finger at the fairly frightened Bagshot, but he did not speak to him; the train was gathering speed. He passed on, reaching the rear platform as the negro porter was closing the vestibule, and catching the man by the arm, he dragged him around, pulled open the door, and swung himself to the ground. Then he stood and looked at the lights of the receding train.

"I think I lied to Thomas," he muttered. "I told him I had Bagshot's goat, though it now seems that he has mine; but if that man don't believe in spirits now, he never will."

A slow smile grew on his face as he recalled the look of abject terror on his enemy's countenance, then the smile died. He came back to the present and began to take thought of his immediate necessities.

He now went systematically through his pockets, without finding the missing wallet. He did find some small bills he had thrust into his vest-pocket,

together with some loose change, but the whole would not have paid his fare to San Antonio; the amount was exactly six dollars and eighty cents—a small capital for one so far from home. He had not even a check-book with him.

Suddenly he remembered catching his coat on something as he came ashore. Undoubtedly the loss had occurred at that time—his wallet had been jerked from his pocket and lay on the steps if it had not fallen into the sea. He hurried to the landing on the jetty. The *Lone Star's* quarter-boat had returned to the ship, and save for the watchmen hovering around the piled cargoes, there appeared to be no one about. Once he was questioned by an inquisitive policeman to whom he openly told the story of his loss and who helped him in his search. But the search was fruitless.

The new difficulty of a lack of cash he faced as became a man of his caste. Going to the hotel which he had seen Bagshot enter, he asked for a room for the night, paying for it from his small fund; then he went to bed. But not to sleep; his brain was too busy for that, his disappointment too keen. For he saw he must give up his chase. It was hopeless. Circumstances had been against him from the first, and this culminating disaster settled it. Bagshot was lost for good, or, if he was captured at all, it must be in the indefinite future; and he was a man, who, given time to provide against con-

tingencies, would make his capture hard if not impossible.

And the girl? It was true that she had promised to write to him. But where? To New York, of course; with her uncle's latest move she must have given up expecting further active service from him. As for the detective, sober thought convinced Wentworth that he could not have been faithless; there must have been some hitch in the law; perhaps his own testimony had been demanded. Of the real trouble the wakeful young man did not even guess; he only knew that his every plan had miscarried.

These were bitter thoughts for Wentworth, who had hoped to satisfy justice, vengeance and love. In the morning he went to the nearest telegraph office and sent a message to Harper. It was all there was to do.

*Paper stolen. Chased him Galveston. Lost him.  
Broke. Wire money. Galveston Hotel. Jack.*

The message sent, he determined to throw himself on the mercy of the hotel proprietor, and that failing, borrow enough of Van Buskirk to tide him over. But on hearing the story of his loss the proprietor took him to his heart at once. He was a reader of character, he said, and knew a gentleman when he saw one. Wentworth might live at the "Galveston" a week or a month or longer; he

was not to worry on the score of deferred payment.

It was the New Yorker's first bit of luck. With a lightened heart though not a joyous one he left the proprietor's presence, not knowing that the tide of misfortune had ebbed to its lowest and had now turned in his favor. But he did not see into the future—which was well for him.

## CHAPTER XVI

### DEPUTY SHERIFF HARPER

**I**T was twenty-four hours before Wentworth received an answer to his message. He had called twice at the office with negative results, but on the third time a telegram was awaiting him. It caused him to be mildly elated, at the same time made him wonder what had happened.

*Have sent two hundred by wire. Stay where you are. Am coming. Have news.*

*Harper.*

There was some delay before the office could furnish him with the money, but with that in his pocket he felt more independent. But what did Harper mean? It was four days before he found out. And in those four days he made himself acquainted with the low-lying city, and walked for hours along its miles of fawn-colored and perfect beach. Once he had the pleasure of meeting Captain Shearpole on the street, and he laughed in that gentleman's face, well knowing that he would not be held accountable for the assault made on the sailor; he knew as well as he knew

anything that the captain had gone far beyond his authority. And Shearpole only scowled as he saw the young man.

At length Harper arrived, hot and dirty but full of a contagious enthusiasm. After a characteristic greeting the two went at once into executive session in Wentworth's room. Up to that time Harper had been exasperatingly non-committal.

"And now tell me where they have gone," were his first words, as he threw himself into a chair and lighted a cigar, ignoring the grime of travel still upon him.

"To San Antonio. They stop at the Menger Hotel, the lady says, and I have reason to think she tells the truth. Don't you care to hear all that has happened to me?"

"No, not yet—for I know something of it. I will unload first, then it will be your turn. They've gone to San Antonio, have they! Well, Bagshot has walked into the trap! Now listen. For three or four days we were wild at your disappearance. Thomas told me of the condition of things at the studio, and I guessed a whole heap—only I was about to look for your body, as I was mortally afraid of foul play—I have feared it all along.

"When I found you had been to the bank I began to have hopes. On the fifth day Thomas came to me with a chap named Bunsen, who had his head bandaged up. Bunsen told me what had happened

and was sure you were on the steamer. He had met with an accident just after he left you; he was knocked completely out, and all his plans went askew. But he had the good sense to hunt up Thomas, who had wit enough to turn him over to me. Good man, that Bunsen! Together we went to work, the detective doing all of his share, and we have kept the thing out of the papers. But it wasn't such an easy thing to get a warrant, you being away. Your telegram helped some; we got it finally, and through the pull exercised by our broken-headed friend I got something for myself. My son, I am now sworn in as a deputy sheriff of the County of New York. It took much persuasion and a little of the rhyno, but I had laid my plans. Take off your hat to me, you ordinary, no-account citizen! I have the necessary papers with which to rope our Christian slugger, for without them we might go lame early in the race."

Wentworth looked at his friend in amazement. "What was your crazy idea of becoming a deputy sheriff?" he asked.

"My crazy idea! To catch the fellow, of course! We can't touch Planet, he being out of the State. That is, we cannot take him for unproved robbery, but we can hold him as a suspect in—in the other thing! Here are my plans:

"I have a letter to one Thorp, Sheriff of Bexar County—a chap afraid of nothing—a character

something on the order of Bunsen. He has been a miner and a cowboy, and is an all-round plainsman, but that is nothing to the purpose. It is my notion that Bagshot intends to drop Miss Merridale somewhere, make a bee-line for the mines, stake them out, register the claim and then skip into Mexico and wait a spell, unless in the meantime the girl steals the paper. But we mustn't depend upon her.

"The first thing is to lay hands on Thorp. I can't act in Texas without a Texas officer! We get out to-night for San Antonio. But let me tell you," said Harper, his face becoming set and serious, "I am in this thing to the hilt—even if it means blood. Are you with me?"

Wentworth looked astonished at the question. "What on earth do you suppose I am here for? To be frightened at a possible fight? Go as far as you like, and I'll follow when I can't lead."

"Not that I doubted you," said Harper, holding out a dirty hand. "It was a perfunctory question born of the jig-water we have imbibed. We will catch Bagshot *et al.* if we have to follow them across the continent. Now you have my plan in the raw. Let's hear your yarn."

Wentworth made a full story of his trip, omitting nothing. When he had finished Harper whistled.

"I'm sorry you showed yourself on the train. He will think you are still following him and be on guard. Let me see the girl's note."

The note was produced. Harper read it, and lifted his eyebrows as he smiled and drooped one eyelid.

"Early for congratulations, isn't it?"

"What do you mean, you idiot?" returned Wentworth, feeling his color rise.

"Oh, nothing! Only when we meet up with her don't ask me to play gooseberry. It isn't my rôle. On your honor, old man, isn't the blind Cupid marking a broad trail for you? Hasn't that bump gone from your head to your heart? Own up."

"Will you kindly try to talk as if you were sane—and incidentally, mind your own business?" was the retort.

"To be sure! And do you think, my poor, addlepated benedick, that I'm not doing both? I'm a trifle selfish myself. That mine attracts me immensely, else I don't know as I would have come so far. With your influence in a certain quarter I might get an interest in it. I will guarantee to form a syndicate and give Miss Merridale two million for a controlling share, if she is willing to sell. See my lay? Nothing like having a friend at court."

"Quit your rot and talk sense," returned Wentworth, his face glowing.

"All right. First I'll wash, then we'll dine. After that we'll take a look at this town. Then we'll take a certain train for a certain city where you will see a certain lady, and—"

Wentworth threw a pillow at him. The big fellow kissed his hand airily and ran, laughing, to his room.

San Antonio lay hot and still under a sky like Italy's when Wentworth and Harper stepped from the train the next afternoon. As a means of precaution the two searched the pretty, red railroad station in order to be sure they were not being looked for. Then they parted.

It had been arranged that the big man, being unknown to any of the Bagshot party, should go straight and openly to the Menger Hotel where he would be in touch with the men he was after. Wentworth would be less obtrusive by taking quarters in one of the less prominent hostleries.

After becoming sure that Bagshot was still in San Antonio the new deputy would hunt up the sheriff of Bexar County, tell his story, show his credentials, and trusted to have the criminals in custody that night. As soon as matters were in running order he would report to Wentworth, who was advised to keep himself from the public eye as much as possible.

And had that gentleman obeyed instructions all might have gone as intended; but he had no sooner stepped from the automobile that took him from the station to the Angelus Hotel than he became nervous and restless. His room seemed but a suffocating box to him though it was airy and comfortable, and after putting himself in order he ignored the

risk of being seen by either of his enemies, and in spite of Harper's warning to keep off the streets, sallied out to get the air his lungs seemed to demand. He figured that there was not one chance in ten thousand of running upon either Planet or Bagshot.

He had not thought to walk toward the center of the city but he soon lost sense of direction. In his path the ancient and modern appeared to be on equal footing. The town, like a young giant, was shaking off the slumber of old ways though not yet fully awake to the new. The seventeenth century here rubbed shoulders with the twentieth; the mantilla of the señorita, the peaked and silver-trimmed hat of the traditional Mexican, the broad felt of the avowed plainsman, the flowery creation of the modern milliner, and the somber "Derby" of the pushing generation, were all in evidence. The spurred rider in his Mexican saddle trotted in the wake of the automobile, and up-to-date architecture threw its shadow over low, adobe structures. It was a scene of contrasts—the mixture of two or three centuries, and it was both attractive and bewildering to Wentworth.

He walked on, interested in all he saw, and had gone what he thought was but a short distance from his hotel when he came to a park-like opening, and then he recognized his whereabouts. He was standing on the edge of the Plaza of the Alamo, and he knew he had no business there.

For in front of him were the tree-embowered grounds of the Menger Hotel, while to the south stood the venerable, historic and dilapidated convent which gave the plaza its name. The appearance of the Alamo was perfectly familiar to Wentworth, who, in his callow, geography days, had looked at the picture of the "Cradle of Texas Independence" and read its tragic history.

There was no mistaking it; and it gave him a sense of satisfaction to know the ruin was being cared for, as indicated by the soldier patrolling in front of its wide doors. Only a few years before the trim park had been but a shadeless, sun-baked opening, and the Alamo a store-house for hay; now modern ideas have prevailed, and the row of buildings opposite the hotel faces upon a wealth of tropical succulence.

Though modernized in appearance to Wentworth there hung over the whole city an atmosphere of shiftlessness—a veritable air of yesterday but never of to-day. It showed in the listlessness of those moving on the streets, in the lack of bustle to which he was used, to the quiet, for which he was grateful.

Though now aware that he was on forbidden ground the young man was in a very pleasant frame of mind. What did it matter? He could not be seen from the hotel across the park; the trees were too thick. And he had a world of faith in Harper, only regretting that necessity compelled him to

keep away from active participation in Bagshot's capture.

At that moment his thoughts were turned to the girl whose face attracted him as the lode-star attracts the needle; and he had just taken off his hat, and was fanning himself with it, when he saw her emerge from among the trees in front of the hotel, and with her head down as if in dejection or deep thought, walk slowly in the direction of the Alamo. He watched her with an intensity of which he was not aware, until she entered the dark portal, the patrolling sentinel apparently taking no notice of her, and then, in spite of all reason, Wentworth determined to follow her and meet her face to face, to hear her voice, perhaps to take her hand. Up to that moment he had not fully realized his mental attitude toward the girl, but he did then; he knew now, and was hardly surprised, and with the awakening knowledge he threw discretion to the wind.

And yet, not altogether the last. He had sense enough not to attempt to cross the plaza where he might be seen from a dozen points; he was too cautious for that. Turning his back on the park, he skirted it by a side street, coming to it again on its lower end, and, hurrying along, he approached and entered the old and bullet-scarred building.

There was no one who prevented. A man with a badge pinned to his flannel shirt, a supplement to the soldier outside, lounged sleepily just inside the

entrance, smoking a cigarette, but neither lifted a finger in question to his entry. A peculiar feeling took possession of the young man as he found himself encompassed by the historic old walls: it was as if the climax of the nearly century old conflict had something to do with himself; that here was to be a climax for him—a climax of his hope; of fear he had none.

The interior was gloomy, and Wentworth soon discovered that the lady had not lingered on the ground floor. He made no inquiries, but seeing a flight of steps against the adobe wall, he went up. As he passed from behind two large packing boxes and advanced into the long room on the second floor he saw the object of his coming standing at the sashless window gazing out on the plaza. With a quick eye the young man took in the bullet-marked walls of the apartment and the chipped rafters overhead. Here the storm of war had raged at its height, for he was in the room in which David Crockett had died.

Wentworth thought to take the girl by surprise, but as she heard his step on the hollow floor she turned and came toward him, holding out her hand.

"I felt that you would come," she said, smiling a welcome, though her face showed a lack of its usual vivacity.

"Then you knew I was in the city?"

"Not until a few moments ago. But I knew you

had escaped from the steamer for Mr. Bagshot told me he saw your ghost on the train before we left Galveston; and he was much upset." She laughed a tired laugh. "I felt it was no ghost, knowing your ability to appear unexpectedly—and I knew you would follow."

"And you saw me?"

"I was sitting under the trees. Yes, I saw you standing over the way." Her face was rosy, but withal bore a troubled look. "I cannot stay long," she continued. "Far from being deserted, as I once feared I might be, I am closely watched. He suspects I know something—suspects I have communicated with you."

"Where is he?" asked the young man, continuing to hold the slender fingers in his grasp.

"I don't know. Away somewhere, for the day. He is away every day, coming back in the evening. He is ready to move on the instant; he is frightened and desperate. Quite changed—even violent to me, and either he or Planet always keeps me in view. José happens to be out now, so I came—at some risk."

"Heaven bless you for coming!" said John fervidly. "You will soon be relieved of them."

"Pray Heaven so, but I don't see how," she said wearily, though her breath quickened as she marked the light in Wentworth's eye, and tried to draw her hands from his.

"What are his plans?"

"Last night he told me we were going to Boerne to-morrow, and outfit for the plains. As if I did not know the reason he made up a story of an impossible ranch. His plan is to take me home to Kerrsville and then go on. He has made some arrangement with someone about the mine. They are to meet at Kerrsville. That is all I know. He does not trust me much. Oh, I wish it was over! I'll give him the paper and all rights. I am sick—sick!"

She drew away her hand and threw out her arms in a gesture of infinite despair. Wentworth looked at her hungrily. He thought nothing then of the fatal paper, and for the moment forgot his father's murderer. His soul was filled with pity and desire for this woman—this girl with her lovely figure, her golden hair, her pale and appealing face. All he had done he felt he had done for her. He loved her—he would have her.

The quiet of the place, the romance of the surroundings, the luxuriousness of the air, and his past disappointments and reverses all contributed in bringing his daring to a pitch which later astonished him. He considered neither words nor deeds at that sublime moment, but afterward he was aware that he had suddenly clasped her in his arms and kissed her on the mouth—a passion as strong as it was new swaying him beyond his own control.

She loosened herself from his embrace, with a

low cry, her face aflame with confusion. "How, oh, how could you do such a thing?" she stammered, but there was no anger in her voice nor sense of outrage in her attitude. Wentworth was stunned at his own temerity. "God knows I did not mean disrespect," he said, his own voice deep with passion. "I—I couldn't help it. I know I took an unfair advantage, but—but I have one excuse. I—"

She interrupted him there. She had retreated toward the window and the lover was beginning his passionate appeal when the girl lifted her hand and pointed through the opening. "Look! Look!" she cried, indicating the plaza. "It is José! He is searching for me! I come here often, and he knows it. Pray Heaven he doesn't see you! Hide—hide—for my sake! Let me go!—oh, let me go!"

For Wentworth, with a lover's doubt solved, had embraced her again. "I will never play the coward for that villain!" he exclaimed hotly. "Tell me you are not offended."

"Offended? Oh, he is at the door! Please, please let me go. No, I am not offended."

"Go, then," said Wentworth, as he released her. Go down and meet him, if you feel you must. I will see you to-night. I will have them both to-night. You will wait for me? Promise!"

"I promise. I promise anything. Oh, cannot you see it is for you I fear? Be careful—be careful!"

She ran from him, hurrying across the room to the stairway. Wentworth did not follow but stepped to the window, and with his heart in his eyes watched her go along the edge of the plaza and wondered why the Mexican had not trailed after her.

But the Mexican, though much of a fool in judgment, was not stupid. He had stopped inside the door of the convent and was chatting, with the air of an old acquaintance, with the officer who lounged there. As he stood rolling a cigarette Miss Merri-dale went out and toward the hotel without as much as a look at him.

In dress the man was metamorphosed. He no longer wore his tight-fitting black costume, but the blue flannel shirt, leggings, and pointed sombrero he had donned fitted his character and surroundings. It was a free-and-easy costume.

He had seen the girl pass him with all her usual hauteur, but with an agitation of face that was unusual, and his wits, made active by the latent jealousy that marks those of his blood, sought for a cause for the latter. There was but one explanation which appealed to him, and after learning from the watch-man that there was a stranger, evidently a Northerner, in the building, he put two and two together. His dark face paled with passion, and his black eyes gleamed like stilettos.

He reasoned that without a doubt Wentworth had reached San Antonio, communicated with Miss

Merridale, and made a rendezvous in the "Alamo." And, as undoubtedly as they had met and talked, just so undoubtedly was the pig Yankee still within the walls of the ancient convent. "Aha! That was the cause of her confusion and disdain! *Caramba!*"

He smoked rapidly the cigarette he had rolled, his white, even teeth set together as he considered what he should do. And it came to his dramatic soul that there were two things which could be done, and done together: rid his patron and himself of this leech who would not be shaken off, and free himself of a menace to his more than half-formed dream of wealth and happiness. Openly he had never approached the girl on the subject of love, but his Latin nature was patient, albeit it was hot. He had no doubt of his ultimate success. Was not her uncle in his favor?

As the solution of the girl's agitated appearance came to him with the force of certainty, he dashed his cigarette to the ground with a Spanish oath, then bent and talked earnestly and rapidly to the officer. Finally he passed something into the man's hand. The watchman nodded, smiled and grunted, and Planet, his own face bearing a mirthless grin, turned into the depths of the convent. When he reached the foot of the stairs he took a knife from his pocket and unclasped its long blade. There was the sinuosity of a prowling cat to his lithe figure as he crept noiselessly up the steps. His conscience

did not trouble him over his contemplated act though some thoughts of policy entered his excited brain. But had not his patron told him while on board the steamer that he might do as he wished with Wentworth on land? Would not Bagshot thank him for removing a persistent menace?

Slowly and silently he reached the floor above, sneaked past the packing boxes and through the arch bisecting the room, and saw his intended victim. There was no mistaking him, for Wentworth stood with his hands on the ragged sill, his gaze turned outward, his back toward the stairs, and there was none but himself and his would-be assassin on that floor. He was easily recognizable to Planet.

It was fortunate for the unsuspecting man that from the head of the stairs to the window where he stood there was considerable distance of clear space. He had seen the girl go along the plaza until she was lost among the trees, and was wondering why the Mexican had not followed her when he heard from behind him the creaking of the ancient board floor. He turned around more in curiosity than alarm but in time to see one of the objects of his thoughts sneaking toward him with a bared knife in his hand.

As the eyes of the two flashed a mutual recognition Planet let out a Spanish oath and his crouched figure straightened as he increased his speed, stealth now being useless and deception equally out of the question. His purpose was plain, and he must now fight it out.

Midway on the floor he was met by his opponent. Wentworth was entirely unarmed, but he hardly needed more weapons than nature had given him. His spirit was buoyed by a great happiness, and the sight of his sneaking enemy filled him with an unholy joy. He had not been an athlete for nothing, and he read the man and his purpose as though Planet's brain had been an open book. The two clinched on the instant, but before the knife had descended Wentworth caught the wrist of the hand holding it, and twisting the weapon from Planet's grasp, flung it to the floor. So far the defense had been easy, and the hot-brained Mexican was no match, mentally or physically, for his cooler antagonist. As he felt himself disarmed and saw the hopelessness of escape, in a state of desperation he did what he had done once before: grappled Wentworth about the body in an endeavor to throw him, at the same time setting up a wild shout of terror that echoed through the hollow structure and aroused those at the door.

But the American was silent as he tore at the clinging arms in a vain endeavor to loose at once their snake-like grasp, then desisting, again got a grip on the lean throat when the Mexican, to save himself, let go his hold. Wentworth threw him to the floor with a crash. He could not kill him in cold blood. The law was enough for him, and here was one of his birds already captured.

He stepped to where the knife had fallen and picked it up in order to insure his own safety, and at that moment the watchman and the man in uniform came bounding up the stairs. The former, ignoring the prostrate Mexican, jumped for Wentworth and took the knife from him, the young man making no effort to resist. Planet struggled to his feet, his face livid from passion and defeat, but in a flash his wily brain caught the advantage of his position. Pointing to his enemy, he screamed:

"Arrest heem! He would kill me! He had me by the thr-roat! He had a daggair!"

"He's a liar!" said Wentworth, turning to the officer who held him by the shoulder. "He sneaked up behind me and I took the knife away from him."

"N—no! eet is a lie!" shouted Planet. "Ask heem if he not hate me. Ask heem if he not follow me from New Yor-rk. I hear he was in these pla-ace—I come up to mak peace with heem. But he mur-r-rder me—he try! Tak heem to the jail! I mak char-r-rge against heem!"

Wentworth caught the situation and grew hot as he began to explain, but the officer cut him short.

"I don't care to know nothin' about the rights of this muss, sir! I didn't see it. All I know is I see you standin' over that man with a knife in your fist, and him yellin' for help. You had better come along with me. You can explain when you get to the station. And you'll do well to come

gentle else you'll come the other way, sir. You may talk to the judge later."

"I am perfectly willing to go with you," returned Wentworth. "You will have no trouble with me, but I insist on the arrest of that man who attempted to murder me. I have that charge to make against him."

"Make what charge you like," was the brilliant rejoinder, "but I didn't see him doin' anything. He wa'n't armed, like you was. And he'll show up all right; take my word for it. Anyhow, he's gone now. I'll get him later."

For with the suggestion of his possible detention Planet had slipped past the figurehead of a soldier, that ornamental guardian of the portal not having spoken a word or lifted a hand, and disappeared down stairs; and a moment later Wentworth, caught by the arm of Law, if not of Justice, was marched off.

The mere fact of his arrest did not greatly trouble him. It certainly was an inconvenience, but it would hardly be more as he would soon see the sheriff, and send for Harper. The thing that vexed him most was the neat way in which Planet had turned the tables on him, and the dogberrian brilliancy of the officer who had taken the Mexican's word for everything. Not until later did it strike him that there might be a friendship or at least an understanding between the two. However, it would make little difference in the end as both Bagshot and

Planet would be arrested that night. After that there would be an open vista of bliss which would well repay him for all he had gone through.

There was no public attention, and consequently no degradation, on the way to the police station. The prisoner was ushered into a barren apartment blue with cigarette smoke, and there a man behind a railed desk asked his name, address and business, smoking carelessly the while, and with equal carelessness took down the charge of assault with intent to kill, as given by his captor.

At this plain miscarriage of justice Wentworth began to grow warm, but knowing the futility of protesting, asked if he might bail himself with the money he had. The lieutenant grinned. No, he could not. Then Wentworth demanded to see the sheriff, unfortunately not mentioning that party's name, and was briskly informed that the sheriff was out of town, and wouldn't have seen him, anyhow. His final request that he might send word to a friend was granted, and on a scrap of paper Wentworth wrote a note to Harper asking him to come at once to the jail, and passed the paper and a bill into the hands of the watchman.

After that he was led away to a dingy room somewhere in the rear. It was hot and close and the windows were barred. As the iron door closed on him and he realized his situation, the affront put upon him grew to its true proportions. For a few

minutes he was controlled by an impotent anger that did not help matters in the least; but finally he quieted, and using what philosophy he could command, awaited Harper's arrival. He was of course unaware that his messenger had thrust the bill into his pocket and returned to his post at the Alamo. There he coolly unfolded the note and read:

*"Am jailed on a false charge. Come to me at once.  
Planet is at the bottom of it.*

*Jack."*

After which he tore the paper into small fragments.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE DEVIL CARES FOR HIS OWN

**I**N the meantime Mr. Deputy Sheriff Harper was having a series of disappointments.

The first thing he did was to learn, in a quiet way, that Bagshot and his party were yet guests at the Menger Hotel. This gave him great satisfaction, taking away his only fear, though, never having seen any of the trio, he could not identify the men, and kept wondering if they were among the numerous characters who lounged in and out of the building.

As soon as he had washed away the grime of his journey he found his way to the jail, only to learn that Sheriff Thorp would not be in town till the following day, he being in chase of a criminal who had fled into an adjoining county.

This was Harper's first set-back. He decided to inform Wentworth of the hitch in his plans, and to consult him as to the wisdom of awaiting Thorp's return, or by demanding assistance from a lesser authority, proceed without him.

But to his surprise, in the face of the admonition

to remain in-doors, Wentworth was out, and had neither left word as to where he was going nor when he would return; and Harper, not dreaming that his friend's absence would be protracted, decided to wait. Taking off his coat, he threw himself on the cool wicker lounge in Wentworth's room, and fell asleep with a promptness that was not remarkable considering his lack of rest on the train the night previous.

When he awoke it was pitch dark. Striking a match, he looked at his watch and, discovering it to be past nine, he could hardly realize the flight of time. And Wentworth had not returned.

Scribbling a hasty note, which he left on the table, Harper went back to the Menger Hotel and was seized with something like consternation on discovering that no word had come from his friend.

He was now certain that something had happened, and his mind naturally turned to Bagshot and Planet as the cause of his companion's sudden disappearance. Wentworth was not the man to be beguiled by one of the blatant and open dives that liberally besprinkled San Antonio. He had not been lured away by viciousness—that idea was nonsensical.

Being a total stranger, there was but one thing for Harper to do—and that to appeal to the police. For some time he hesitated at taking the step, even returning to Wentworth's hotel; but, finding him

still absent, in deep worry he set out for the jail again. Entering the dimly lighted and barren room he accosted the half-dressed man who sat with his feet cocked on the pine desk.

"A friend of mine has disappeared from his hotel. I am getting anxious about him. Can anything be done to find him? He is a stranger here, as am I."

"Where's he from?" asked the man, slowly taking his feet down and flicking the ash from his cigar.

"From New York."

"New York, hey! What name?"

"John Wentworth."

"Tall chap? Broad shoulders, with a dinky mustache an' a lot of hot talk?"

Harper looked at the fellow in astonishment.

"I think you refer to the man I mean. What do you know of him?"

The officer reached for a dilapidated book lying on the desk and opened it, running a dirty finger down the page.

"Wentworth, John. New York. Arrived from Galveston this afternoon. Tourist, he calls himself. Yaas! that's him! I think we have your friend in the cooler, stranger."

"What has he done?"

"Charged by a greaser. Assault—intent to kill. This here town has got to be kept peaceful, stranger! Case may come up to-morrow, sometime, ef the judge ain't too busy."

Harper was stunned.

"Can I see him?" he asked.

"Not on yer life—at this hour. Come in about sunup. Ye wouldn't disturb a man's sleep would ye?"

"I think he will be glad to be disturbed by me."

"Well, he won't be. Ye needn't worry about him bein' lost no more; he's safe enough!"

"Can't I bail him out?"

"Probably—to-morrer; that's the judge's business, not mine."

Harper fairly staggered from the place. What had Wentworth done? What would be the result of this? A greaser! He stopped in his walk as light came to him. Had Wentworth tried to capture Planet single-handed?

He did not sleep that night, and early the next morning he was at the jail, though it was nearly ten o'clock before he was admitted to his friend. As the turnkey was about to unlock the door Harper asked him if Sheriff Thorp had yet arrived.

"No, sir, but we expect him back shortly. Had a 'phone from him late last night. He got his man."

"Ah!" Harper took a bill from his pocket and held it out to his conductor. "Will you take this, and let me know as soon as he arrives? I wish to see him." The turnkey looked a bit suspicious, but took the bill. "Who shall I say wants him?" he asked.

"Deputy Sheriff Harper, of New York."

The expression of indifference fell like a mask from the fellow's face.

"Yaas, sir—certainly, sir; I'll let you know at once, sir. You was gave an hour in here, but you can take your time, sir. Yes, sir." And he swung open the door.

Fortunately Wentworth had been untroubled by a companion. Haggard-eyed, dirty, and disheveled, he saw Harper enter, and his rage burst forth. Briefly he told his story, leaving out the warmth of his interview with the young lady, his big friend listening with mingled feelings of anger and relief.

"Why in the name of common sense didn't you send for me at once?" he asked.

"Send for you! I did--by the man who arrested me—and wondered why you didn't come! I gave the scoundrel two dollars."

"You were probably outbid by Planet. I'll make it hot for that Alamo chap—if we have the time; for this thing will hurry them. But, thank Heaven, it's no worse! I've imagined horrible things! Have patience. Jack, it will soon be all right! No one but a fool will believe Planet's story, and when the sheriff comes the thing will be set straight in a jiffy. They are here and we will have them!"

"And, have you seen—"

"No, my son; not to be sure of her. There are several beauties at the hotel, and—"

"Never mind your nonsense," interrupted Wentworth, who was not to be chaffed into good humor. "By the Lord, I'd almost sacrifice Bagshot to get hold of Planet!—where we wouldn't be disturbed."

"And would you also sacrifice Miss Merridale's interest—to say nothing of the lady herself?"

"I've been an ass!" was the disgusted rejoinder.

"In what way, Jack? Not regarding her?"

Wentworth looked seriously at his big friend. "Perhaps you would think so if you knew. No, I didn't refer to her. Quite the contrary; that is the only part of the day I am proud of!"

"I grope, Jack."

"Well, I haven't been honest, Tom. She was and is the crux of the matter. It is she I find I am chasing. I 'fess cold. I'm in the race for her—and now she knows it. I told her—and by all that's holy I'm going to get her and relieve her and myself of the two villains who have outraged and robbed both of us. If you must have it—I love her!"

Harper bent forward and reached out his hand. "I congratulate you, old man, but the last is no news to me. However!" He was interrupted by the door being opened by the turnkey.

"Sheriff Thorp just arrived this minute, sir. He's in front of the jail now. If you want to see him you'd better take your chance while you can get it."

Harper waited for no more. He jumped up,

running out of the cell and so into the jail office in time to see a mounted man swing himself from his horse and enter the building. Covered with dust, he was dressed after the fashion of the traditional cow-boy, and conspicuously armed with two revolvers. Harper went straight up to him as he entered the office.

"This is Sheriff Thorp?"

"Yes, sir," was the answer given with a snap.

"I am Deputy Sheriff Harper of New York. I have a letter for you, and wish to have a talk with you as soon as possible."

As he spoke he looked sharply at the Texan, and saw a stocky man of about his own age whose face was deeply tanned, and whose hair and small moustache had been faded by long exposure to the burning sun until they had the tint of hay. The whole color of the man was faded, but through this neutral tint there shone a pair of lively black eyes that commanded instant attention. Harper considered him a large copy of Bunsen, only more nervous, more intense, and entirely lacking in the latter's boyish expression and height of color. Thorp seemed to take in the New Yorker with a flash of his eye.

"Very good, sir. I'll see you within ten minutes, and give you all the time you require. Please step into this room."

In the meantime Wentworth was waiting. He sat

unmoving on the edge of the board which had been his bed. His spirit was not in the least broken by his hard experience, but the anger that still gnawed at his heart was now largely directed against himself. Harper had been gone two hours, and high noon had struck. The impatient prisoner was wondering what had become of his chum when he heard a heavy footstep accompanied by the clank of spurs coming down the stone corridor, and in a moment Harper entered with Sheriff Thorp. The latter went straight to the prisoner and held out his hand.

"I'm Sheriff Thorp," he began abruptly and without waiting for Harper to speak. "I have become a little familiar with your case, sir. It is interesting from the start, and you have been outraged. There's going to be a damned hot time in this ranch over your affair, when I can see to it. Sharp dodge on the greaser's part! Quick wit, I must say! But I've got to hang to the letter o' the law an' get you out in the regular way. I reckon you'll be free as soon as court sits—say about three o'clock. In the meantime Mr. Harper an' me will just walk over to the hotel on a little matter o' business—though I have an idee—I have an idee!"

He stopped and drew his brows together as though in deep thought. "I'll have you out of here, anyway," he went on abruptly. "Come up stairs to my room. You'll stay there until out of limbo.

Great pity Bunsen couldn't ha' come with you—great pity! Come on, sir."

There was a burst of spontaneity about the man that carried Wentworth before it. He felt that here was competency, and that with such a backing he would obtain both justice and revenge. Revenge! Wentworth was only human and he was still suffering.

It was nearly three o'clock, and San Antonio, no longer entirely wedded to ancient customs, was coming early out of *siesta*. For something like two hours Wentworth had been in a large, cool room in the sheriff's quarters, that official and Harper having gone to the Menger Hotel. The young man had washed, and refreshed himself with a good meal and now, in improved humor, was leaning back in a big cane-seated chair, smoking a cigar and awaiting the return of the sheriff with his prisoners, and the opening of the court.

His fancies flew lightly. With her uncle arrested what would become of Grace? Not that he asked himself the question for lack of knowing. He knew well enough. He smiled to himself.

"No one to protect her?" He would see to that. Harper might form his syndicate—and go North alone. And then—

His pleasant reverie was broken in upon by the man whose name was floating through his mind. Without knocking, the new deputy sheriff burst into the room with as much precipitation as though

the apartment were his own, and his first words brought Wentworth's castle tottering to the ground.

"They have escaped! They have gone, Heaven knows where, for there is not a trace of them! Oh, fool! ass! imbecile that I have been!"

"Gone!" shouted Wentworth, springing to his feet.

"Yes! Vanished into thin air! Thorp has stayed behind to investigate. He's not a cursed bit flummuxed. I ought not to have waited an instant for Thorp—or gone to see you about what to do! I might have had them! I'm a fine specimen of an officer of the law! Oh, kick me, somebody!"

"And Miss Merridale has left no word—no note for me?"

"Not a thing. I inquired. We only know that some time in the evening, when I was asleep at your place, an automobile came up and took the whole kit."

"We should easily trace the auto---" began Wentworth.

"That's the curse of it!" interrupted Harper. "No one knows its number or its driver. It was a planned sneak—a get-away. They were scared by what Planet did yesterday, knowing what would be likely to happen to-day. Oh, I ought to be horse-whipped! Why in Heaven's name didn't you stay in the house, as you agreed to do?"

There was no answer to this. Harper savagely

bit off the end of a cigar and began to smoke, throwing himself into a chair with an air of infinite disgust.

Neither man spoke for a time. There was nothing to say, since the story had been told. Wentworth knew that the fault had been his, but in the face of what had happened in the Alamo before Planet attacked him, he was not prepared to say he was sorry he had broken his promise though he was sorry enough for one of its results. He understood his friend's irritation, and knew that a hasty or inappropriate word would be a spark which might cause an explosion both would forever regret. The two men sat and looked at each other, both smoking, but neither ventured on a remark. The situation was growing more and more tense, and each silently prayed for the coming of the sheriff. He might have news.

But it was nearly an hour more before Thorp came in, bringing with him an air of alacrity and decision. "For a time we have lost them," he said, as he entered the room, but the remark was given in a manner that conveyed the idea that the news was favorable. "At the railroad station I get no trace of them. From what I have discovered I have come to the conclusion that they were driven into the open country or to some point where the auto' was exchanged for an ambulance. But in what direction they went I am not yet satisfied. If I only savvied more of the men!"

"The men? Haven't you heard the whole story?" asked Wentworth.

"Only in part. Little aside of what the warrant covers, and nothing as to the character of the men."

"Then you are but half-informed! You tell him, Tom. I can't go into the thing again."

And so Harper told the whole story, Wentworth here and there putting in a word of correction. It was a long but very complete tale, and when it was finished the sheriff's face had lost its puzzled expression.

"A precious pair of villains!" he ejaculated. "I believe they have gone as straight to the mines as possible, or will go after disposing of the lady. They will outfit for the plains at Boerne. They must, for Boerne would be the last place they could outfit. And they have elected to drive rather than risk identification on the railroad."

"I know that Bagshot intended to go to Boerne. Miss Merridale told me that," said Wentworth.

"Ah, that simplifies matters! Boerne is thirty-two miles north from here. I was born there; my father lives there now—drives the stage from Boerne to Johnson City. The place is something more than the mere settlement it was a few years ago, but it is the jumping-off place for the *llanos* directly west. By thunder, I see their game! Look here!" He went to a drawer and brought out a map of Texas. "See! They go to Leon Springs, then to Boerne,

then to Comfort, crossing the ford of the Guadalupe, than to Kerrsville where he is to meet some parties who are to go on to the mine with him. Of course they are hurried but they are conservative, too; they show that by taking to horses and wheels instead of going by the short railroad that ends at Kerrsville. And they dare not drop the lady until they are ready to lose themselves on leaving Kerrsville, having outfitted for the mines. Gentlemen, I know every foot of the land beyond Kerrsville. A few miles west it is practically a desert. It would be hard to catch them if they enter it. I shall at once telegraph Boerne and Kerrsville, but I doubt if we get them that way; I think Bagshot is too foxy for such a simple trap. Does he know Mr. Harper is connected with this?"

"No. He thinks I alone am after him," said Wentworth.

"Good! Now I see my way! Gentlemen, this thing interests me for its own sake as well as for yours. Just now I am comparatively free, and I will take this up and carry it through, if you wish it, but it will cost you time, money and hard work. Are you for it?"

Thorp was walking up and down the room as he talked, his head bent, his thumbs hooked into his belt, his step and voice filled with energy. Wentworth caught the man's fire.

"Most decidedly we both are for it, when I am

free," he said. "Neither time, money, nor work need be considered."

"That paper alone is worth the trip after them," said Thorp. "You may leave the details to me. Of course Planet won't be in court, and you will be discharged at once. But, gentlemen, you must start the moment I am ready. We are chasing desperate men who will now stop at nothing. I would advise you to buy proper clothing and arm yourselves—a rifle each and revolvers. In Texas a civilian can no longer carry arms without a license, but officers of the law are exempt. I will swear you both in as my posse. It is best to keep this to ourselves. Stand up.

He drew himself up before them and in a rapid and perfunctory manner administered the oath. There was a headlong dash about the man that was contagious, and the two friends felt themselves booked for a novel adventure, though neither hesitated for an instant.

"Meet me in front of this building at five o'clock to-night," said Thorp in a voice that admitted of neither question nor suggestion. "I have a heap to attend to before that time. Can you ride?"

"We both ride."

"Good! And your ability will be tested. I will attend to getting horses."

"Here?" asked Harper, astonished; "Don't we go by rail to Boerne?"

Thorp smiled. "Hardly—and for two reasons;

first, that I wish to cover more breadth of ground than lies between two steel rails; and second; that there isn't another train to Boerne until nine tomorrow morning. And I wish to stop several times on my way."

He walked to the door where he turned and spoke again, his face becoming impressive. "Gentlemen, those two scoundrels have nigh twenty-four hours start of us. You have booked yourselves for no picnic; it will be an experience that will test your sand, or I fail to read those fellows straight. But we will not let up on them until we have them, alive or dead. When I go on a trail I camp on it."

And with that he went out. Later both Wentworth and Harper remembered his prophecy.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE STAGE-DRIVER

**I**NSTEAD of its being five o'clock, it was past sunset when the mounted trio left the door of the San Antonio jail. In that latitude darkness falls swiftly after the sun goes down, but the moon in its second quarter gave plenty of light for traveling.

From the time Thorp had left the two men in his room, there had been no hitch other than some delay in the business of the sheriff's office. Regarding the steps taken for Wentworth, the matter had been almost perfunctory. He had appeared before the judge, and was promptly discharged, not only on account of the weight of his own story, but through the absence of his accuser. The case of the watchman at the Alamo was to remain in abeyance until the more urgent business of catching Bagshot had been accomplished.

Nothing more had been learned of the fugitives, and apparently nothing more was necessary to the present knowledge of their pursuers. Thorp was

positive that Bagshot was on his way toward the Northwest.

"I cannot quite understand it," said Wentworth, as the trio moved out of the city. "Whatever else he may be, Bagshot is no fool. He believes I am on his trail. Why did he not send Miss Merridale to Kerrsville by railroad, while he and Planet hid themselves in Mexico until the trouble blew over and they knew I would be gone? That would be their logical proceeding."

"My friend," said Thorp, drawing his horse to Wentworth's side, "my experience is that criminals are rarely logical, as you call it. For which we are to be thankful; for if their brains worked consistently we would have little chance of catching them. Every crook has a touch of what might be called insanity. He lacks mental balance else he wouldn't be a crook; and while he appears to be mighty sharp in some of his motions he is equally stupid in others.

"I figure on Bagshot this way: In the first place, he is afraid of the girl; mistake number one, as she could only obtain that paper through a long and uncertain civil suit. In the second place, he and Planet are not alone in this job; there is someone in Kerrsville awaiting them, someone essential to the success of the scheme, and that is why he is going there--that is his second mistake. In the third place; you have upset his plans and rattled him, first by charging him with the murder of your

father, and second by your knowledge of the value of the map. He knows you have money, and probably fears that you have made a duplicate of the map, as you have seemed to care little for it, or have obtained sufficient knowledge from it to start an expedition of your own, stake out the claim yourself and render all his trouble useless. Do you see?"

"I see your point."

"Well, to make my theory hold water I have found out that Bagshot has had many telegrams from Kerrsville, but I don't know who from; if I did I would have him watched. I have already telegraphed to the sheriff there to hold the outfit when it appears; but the chances are that it will not appear as it left here. As you say, Bagshot is no fool."

"Our chance, then, is to overtake them?" asked Wentworth, catching the shrewdness of Thorp's deductions.

"It seems to be our main chance," returned the officer. "I have much to think of," and drawing away his horse he relapsed into sombre silence.

At the start Wentworth had been amused. The smallness of the horses and the height of the cantle and horn of the Mexican saddle excited his ridicule, but he had reason to acknowledge the staying powers of the animals and the comfort of the cradle-like structure ere he again saw the ancient Texas city.

There was a strong smack of the romantic in his

situation, in the half-light of the moon, in the silence, in the nature of his errand; and these, with their novelty under the circumstances, had a strong effect on his spirits. Here was a dash of life the like of which he had never before known, and he little realized that he was being lifted by the excitement of the greatest and most brutal of all games: the man-hunt.

To him it seemed ages since he had left New York, ages since he had been beset by *ennui*. Ahead lay a glow that tinged the young man's mental horizon and caused his spirits to fly as wildly as sparks in a gale. It was high tide with him—the flooding of love, youth, imagination and perfect health. He was yet to need the sustaining power of each.

As the trio drew from the city limits and ambled over the 'black-waxy' of the so-called State Road now turned to a gray powder by the dryness of season, Wentworth could have lifted his voice and sung from an excess of animal spirits—only there was something grim in the bearing of the young sheriff—a something that repressed any outburst.

In round numbers Leon Springs is twenty-five miles north of San Antonio; and as they had not pushed their pace, it was nearly eleven o'clock when they reached it. They drew rein before an unlighted house with a corral behind it, and by then both Wentworth and Harper were fagged out by the

unusual ride. "Stay on your cayuses, gentlemen," said the sheriff, as he swung from his own piebald horse.

"Don't we stop here?" asked Harper, who was saddle-galled.

"Can't tell yet. Played out?"

"I don't know what you call it, but if we go farther to-night I am afraid I will have to walk."

"I think not," was the short return. "I gave you fair warning."

"You're the boss," said Harper, shifting his big body in the saddle, "but that means eating from a mantel-piece and sleeping on my stomach for a month to come. I'm glad I came."

Thorp smiled grimly. "And this is nothing to what you will have to come to—unless I lose my guess. Never mind, sir, so's you're game. You'll get used to it." He left the two in the road, knocked on the door of the house, and after a few moments of whispered conversation with the man who answered his summons, he came back and got into his saddle. "Gentlemen," he said. "I am a bit puzzled. Our friends have not passed through Leon Springs, but it is likely they flanked it. We will get on to Boerne. My father will know more than I can learn here."

The others groaned inwardly; but the sheriff and his tired posse started again. Five miles beyond Leon Springs they climbed the rampart which

stretches across central Texas—an ancient beach to the shallow sea that ages before covered the plain below. From there the character of the country changed to a rolling plateau, covered with clumps of live-oak and patches of woodland broken by lovely savannas. By this the moon was low but it still gave sufficient light to expose the beauty of the new land—the “God’s Country” to those who have once known it, and which, after it is left, forever beckons.

But neither of the city men were in condition to appreciate the glory of the prospect nor the beauties of nature; in fact neither was more than half-alive, and the party moved on in dead silence, so far as words were concerned. It was after one o’clock when they forded the Cibola and entered the silent hamlet of Boerne. In an hour more their horses were corraled, and Wentworth and Harper were asleep in the house of the sheriff’s father, too exhausted to think. For aught they knew, or cared, Bagshot might have been in the next room.

But the following morning found them in better shape though suffering from that species of rheumatism which springs from the overtaxed muscles of those who, though horsemen, have not had late practise. When they woke the sun was high and they were startled by the lateness of the hour, wondering why they had been allowed to rest so long. They learned soon enough.

On meeting the sheriff, who showed no signs of either fatigue or haste—though he had not slept at all—their inquiries were met by disappointment.

"They haven't been through Boerne, either and they would likely stop here if they came this way. They've got to outfit somewhere. Honest Injun, I feel something like a fool about this! I felt sure we would get more than a trace of them here, but you needn't think we have lost them though we have lost the scent for a while. I've been consulting the guv'nor. He wants to see you gentlemen before he starts on his stage trip."

Bud Thorp, the driver of the stage from Boerne to Johnson City in Blanco County, was a man who might have been a well-to-do New England farmer, from appearances. He was clean-shaven, tanned to a deep leather color, and had his son's eyes—black, piercing, and shrewd. Apparently, he was as open as the day; but for sound sense no one in Kendall County was his superior.

"Harper! Glad to know ye, sir. An' Wentworth same, by thunder! Glad to know ye both! Now, Cave," he said, turning to the sheriff, "I'll just naturally con that story again, an' take bearin's. All I can say is no such party has run a course on this settlement—not in no ambulance. Nothin' but cedar-post wagons has gone through Boerne 'sides what goes through on that railroad. I usher

drive to San Antonio, gents, but that one-hoss concern made me change my route. Gentlemen, we're just a little off soundin's here, an' not many craft sails by, but what we speak 'em all. What will ye have before we gets to work?"

Both Wentworth and Harper were struck by the marine flavor of the old fellow's words, and wondered at the brine found so far from the ocean. It was evident that the stage-driver had once been a sailor. They were sitting on the veranda of the house; and the sheriff, always with an eye to business, pulled out the warrant, read it, and stated what he knew.

"Good Lord!" said the old man, straightening himself and pushing his spectacles up to his forehead. "Bagshot! Simeon Bagshot! I don't savvy no Planet, but I'm on to Bagshot with both feet from keel to truck. Why, he came from these parts! An' suspected o' killin' a man named Wentworth! Your relation, son?" He swung around to John.

"My father, sir. He was in Texas for some time twelve years ago. Did you ever know him?"

The old man drew his shaggy brows together and pondered. "Did I know your father, son? Well, I dunno as I did; but I knew a Wentworth some thutty-odd years ago. You bet I did; here's what he gave me."

The stage-driver pulled off his Stetson and showed a glistening bald head, across the top of which was

a deep, sunken welt—the mark of a terrific scar.  
He laughed.

"Hearin' that old name seems funny!" he exclaimed. "Well, I hadn't got nothin' ag'in him. Hain't seen him since. I wonder now if that Wentworth could 'a' been your dad, son? We was boys at sea together, an' got inter a row over some money. We was lyin' in Havana Harbor that time, me a hulk of a cabin-boy, an' him a sort o' midshipman-like. Anyhow, we got into a fight—guess it was my fault, I was pretty tough—an' in the thick of it Went fetches me a crack on the knob with a belayin'-pin, an' it nigh finished me for good. Guess he thought he killed me. Anyways, when I got sense again, two days after, Bagshot—he was there, sort o' supercargo—told me he thought I was dead and had told Wentworth so. Went got plumb scared—didn't wait to find out—just skipped right then—jumped overboard and swum ashore. As I said I didn't see him again but I did hear as how he got to be skipper of his own ship, years after, an' got rich. He got away with me, anyhow; and Bagshot he told me as how he got away with the money, too—money that didn't belong to him. But on that last p'int I found out later that Simeon lied—he certainly wa'n't above lyin'. I know for sure that though Went was some high spirited he wasn't no thief. We was just boys together, an'— What's up, sir?"

For John Wentworth had risen slowly to his feet, his face gray. "As heaven is above me?" he fairly groaned. "My father has been fighting a shadow for over thirty years—a shadow—a hideous ghost held up to him by the man we are after! Bagshot is twice a murderer!"

Harper looked stunned; the stage-driver appeared puzzled. "What d'ye mean?" he asked, pausing in the act of lighting the pipe he had been filling. Wentworth turned to him, his face becoming radiant. "I thank God for this meeting, sir! It has been more than chance! You may laugh at me when I tell you I think it is God's justice. The man who struck you was my father. He always thought he had killed you, and Simeon Bagshot held him to that belief, on the strength of it blackmailing him before he killed him—and killed him because he would not betray his trust and deliver the paper, the value of which both knew. The fancy that he was a criminal worried the joy from my father's life. Why did he not investigate? The ghost would have been easily laid!"

"Be you his son—sure?" shouted the old man, dropping his pipe and getting to his feet.

"Yes, without a doubt! My father was Captain Wentworth—was commander of his own ship—and did make fortunate voyages and investments. He told me of some crime he had committed when a boy at sea and while in a passion."

And Wentworth, hurriedly and with some pardonable incoherence, retailed the story of the night his father died.

Old Thorp stood bareheaded, listening eagerly; then he dashed his hat to the floor of the veranda, and grasped the young man's hand.

"Hain't got the least feelin' agin' ye, son—nor yer father, either. But I savvy Bagshot like readin' his log. I know him though I hain't seen him for more'n five year. Ye got to get him, Cave, you just got to get him! Tell me what you've done, an' why ye think he's come this way."

The sheriff explained the course of his reasoning, and the old man laughed in derision.

"You hain't been wonderful smart for an officer, Cave! I see the hull thing!"

"How?" asked the sheriff, flushing under his tan.

"This way. Bagshot was bound to change his plans after the muss Planet had with our friend here. He was afraid the gal told what she knew. That's one thing. Next, he darsen't go nowhere far by railroad 'cause of the telegraph. Well, what has he done? He's bound to come in this direction, final, if he's goin' to either Kerrsville or the mine. You can gamble that he drove that ambulance with the gal in it to Corbyn or New Brunfels—jest to throw you off the track—an' he done it.

"Cave, he's behind ye, not ahead o' ye. When

he comes up outfitted from below he'll give Boerne a wide berth. He's a foxy cuss, and him an' the greaser make a strong team—a reg'lar Injun team."

While the sheriff was conversing with his father Wentworth had moved from the veranda, followed by Harper. His still growing emotion had become too great to allow him to remain with the others. The whole matter was plain to him; no reasoning, no further proof was necessary; events fitted too nicely for any but one conclusion to be drawn, and such conclusion came to the young man with the force of an absolute certainty. His father had been hounded, ruined, and, constructively at least, murdered by a liar. Now the captain's name was at last free from taint, and he, his son, might look the world in the face. To the young man it was like a cloud passing from before the sun.

But Bagshot? It shook Wentworth even to think of him, and he could barely contain himself as Harper referred to the fugitives. The old man on the veranda looked at the two friends, then bent his mouth to the ear of his son.

"That young feller will shoot Simeon Bagshot on sight," said the stage-driver, in a whisper. "You ain't never goin' to take Simeon alive—or I can't read faces no more."

"I won't blame him," returned the sheriff. "But he won't kill him, nor we won't serve the warrant by setting down here. Those two fellows with me

don't lack no sand, and I don't like the idea of turning back."

"Shore not, Cave! 'Cause that's what Bagshot looks for! He won't touch Boerne; an' he'll go round Comfort, likely, not hankerin' after no settlements. But he's got to cross the Guadalupe unless he takes to the desert, which ain't understandable. Can't ye see?"

"You mean we got to lay for him at the Guadalupe ford?"

"*Percisely*" said the driver, bringing his great hands together with the sound of a pistol-shot. "Camp right there until they come up—an' there ye have it! Bagshot ain't lookin' for no trouble forward. I bet he's breakin' his neck lookin' for dust behind."

"It is the best way!" said the sheriff, nodding his head from sudden conviction. "We'll outfit for camping and go on to-night."

"Now yer talking!" said his father, rising and pulling out a silver watch. "An' I got to begin to hook up the stage, too. So long, son!"

## CHAPTER XIX

### AT THE FORD

FIVE miles or more south of the small settlement bearing the significant name of Comfort, the Guadalupe River winds through soil black with natural richness, and at its single available ford the road leading northwest, here but a wide trail over the prairie, crosses the stream at the only point within miles where there is a falling away of the low but steep bluffs.

For many years the land has been safe against the roving Apache and the predatory Mexican, and is fairly safe from the lawlessness which once characterized the plains. But there are still sporadic cases of violence of the old order though Texas has become modernized. Life and property have more protection than the mere word of the law; yet even at the present day though men are not allowed to carry arms indiscriminately against their brothers it is done covertly, for a stranger met out on the *llanos* is very apt to prove an enemy. The adage that applies to the African desert might largely apply to-day to the great Western plains.

On the south bank of the Guadalupe the river margin is overgrown with a thick tangle of chaparral, post-oaks, and low cedars; but on the north side a few live-oaks sprang from as fair a reach of grass-land as the eye ever beheld. It is a rich country; the ranches are immense in size, and in the interval between Boerne and the old German settlement of Comfort there are but few houses to be seen by the traveler on the main trail.

It was in the shade of one of the great trees on the north side of the river, a little removed from the ford itself, that the pursuing party camped and waited. Save for the addition of a lead-horse carrying provisions their outfit was unchanged and they had none of the luxuries of a picnic camp. Thorp had been busy and thorough, yet the only additional news he had gleaned in a lone trip to Comfort was negative: no ambulance containing a lady had yet passed through the place.

The wait was a welcome rest; but to Wentworth, with yet another indictment against the man he hated with his whole soul, every hour of inactivity increased his nervous tension. The horses were picketed in a thicket, that a sight of them might not arouse the suspicion of the fugitives or tempt a stray desperado. And danger from the last character was not little.

So the party settled down. One day—two days—three days passed, and there had been no sign of

Bagshot; indeed, there was hardly a sight of anyone. It was now early in October, but the land about gave no such evidence of the advancing season as might be noted in the North. In the sun the heat was yet severe, the sky a glorious expanse of blue; there was little or no wind nor were there the "gulf-clouds" which are usually a feature of the Texas firmament.

Talk had languished among the three, but as Thorp stood looking over the broad expanse under his eye he turned to the two lying beneath the tree.

"This ain't exactly the weather I look for at this time of year," he said.

"What's the matter with it?" asked Wentworth, who had been smoking in gloomy silence.

"Nothing—in one way. It suits us all right, but there's a stillness about things that strikes me as meaning business later. The nights ain't cool enough, and the clouds don't form and fly like they ought to. Things seem to be holding their breath. Don't you notice it?"

"It's lovely weather—and if it is holding its breath it's doing about what I am. Taken with the rest of it, it is damned monotonous."

And it had become monotonous, this unrewarded waiting. Even the sheriff's face began to wear a less confident look; Harper was openly discontented though he always wore a good-natured countenance, and his growls were without venom or fault-finding.

Wentworth fairly twitched from suppressed nervousness. He began to suspect that Bagshot had given them the slip and had not intended to cross the Guadaloupe at all. The thought was maddening. Each man held the same suspicion and each man concealed it from the others. Wentworth, now hardened and rested, had made no formal protest as yet, but he felt that he must surely cry out against another day of inaction.

For besides the disappointment and the dull passing of the hours there was little or nothing to be seen of life. Once in a while a man on horseback passed over the trail, but the small, single track railroad had absorbed most of the travel and hauling; no wagons lumbered over the wide and shallow ford, and the faint whistle of the locomotive which once in a while drifted from the distance was like a cry of triumph. The old, wild days, the provincial, devil-may-care days, the days of makeshifts, seemed to be gone forever.

As the sheriff made his remark about the unusual weather he walked away. It had been on the tip of Wentworth's tongue to sound him as to his future plans, but he let the chance go by and the day for such inquiry never dawned.

At night the watchers had taken turns picketing the ford on horseback. The evening of the third day, which he swore to himself should be the last of his inactivity, Wentworth took the early watch

from eight to twelve. Nothing broke the silence save the swish of the risen gulf-wind; nothing met his vision save the now familiar landscape lying broad and clear, drenched in the light of a full, southern moon.

At midnight he returned to camp in a decided ill humor, staked out his horse, and brought in Harper's, which was already saddled for instant mounting. Quietly routing out the deputy, he fell into his place and went instantly to sleep. Thorp did not stir; he was to go on at four o'clock.

Harper stretched himself, got into his saddle and, riding over the moonlit ford, took his station on the rising ground beyond, and there sat motionless. He could see a mile or more to the south, and if anything came over the trail he would have ample time to ride in and arouse the others. An hour passed. Harper found he was nodding.

He pulled himself together, and determined to keep himself awake by smoking; but on feeling his pocket he discovered he had no cigars. Deciding to return and get a supply from the pack, he splashed back through the ford; then, thinking he might disturb the others by approaching on horseback, he tied his mount to a shin-oak near the bank of the river and walked silently into camp. Wentworth woke as Harper came in. "See anything?" he asked.

"Not a thing," was the whispered answer. "Came

in to get some weeds." The young man swore and rolled over, composing himself for another nap.

Harper had been away from his post twenty minutes. Obtaining the cigars he started back to his horse, and, as he came to within a hundred feet of where he had tied the animal, he saw a mounted man halted beside it, a black figure silhouetted against the bright sky.

"Stop where ye be, stranger!" said the horseman in a low voice; and a revolver glistened in the moonlight.

Harper halted abruptly.

"Who are you?" he demanded, letting his hand go to his hip.

"Quit that, friend! I only wants to know if you have seen an ambulance with two men and a woman cross the ford to-day. I'm Deputy Sheriff Folger, of Kendall County. Stand just where ye be, an' answer."

At that moment Wentworth, alert to anything unusual, thought he heard voices. He sat up and rubbed his eyes, then throwing aside his blanket got to his feet and walked out toward the ford. As he caught sight of the two men he quickened his pace; he was probably a third of his way from camp as Harper answered the man on horseback.

"If you are an officer you needn't fear me. I'm a deputy, myself," returned Harper. "I'm looking for that same ambulance."

"Oh! Ye be, hey? Come up closer. Be ye alone?"

"You see I am alone!" said Harper, stepping toward the man, his suspicions allayed. "But I have—" He never finished the sentence, for at that moment the stranger caught sight of Wentworth coming rapidly toward them.

"Alone, be ye? Ye liar!" he shouted, half-turning his horse. With that exclamation he leveled his revolver and fired.

Harper's right arm jerked straight out; he spun around and, with a bubbling groan, fell to the grass. As he went down the horseman raised his weapon and fired a shot at Wentworth, but without effect; then he jerked free the rein of Harper's horse, and, wheeling, drove back through the ford with the captured animal.

All this happened in an instant, and all fell under the eye of Wentworth. Not knowing the conditions beyond the fact that his friend was shot and himself fired at, he drew his own revolver, and deliberately kneeling on the dew-covered prairie leveled at the retreating figure, holding the weapon with both hands as though it were a gun, and fired.

In the clear light he saw the man sway in his saddle, but the fellow did not lose his seat; instead, he turned and fired again at Wentworth, that shot, like the former, going wild. Harper's horse, now cast

loose, went tearing back over the plain. The stranger fled down the trail and disappeared.

Aroused by the shots, Thorp came hurrying up, swearing as he ran, and was beside Harper almost as soon as Wentworth. Together they lifted the wounded man, who looked up perfectly conscious.

"Where are you hit?" cried John in a frenzy of fear.

"Through the lung—right lung—high up! The shock of the slug knocked me over! I ought to have had it through the head for being such a forsaken idiot!"

He spoke without great distress, though weak from shock. "Thank God it's no worse!" said the sheriff. "A clean shot through the right lung isn't the cussedness thing that could happen, though that's bad enough! We must get you somewhere at once! Abercrombie's ranch is two miles back, and one up the river. There's no doctor at Comfort, but there is in Boerne—a northern man with a sick wife. Abercrombie's is the best point! I'll fetch the horses. Can you ride?"

"I'll ride all right, I reckon," said Harper doggedly, struggling to his feet with the help of Wentworth while the sheriff started off on a run. In a few minutes Thorp returned with three horses; Harper, his face pale in the moonlight, leaned heavily on his friend.

"I found your animal standing with the others,"

said the sheriff. "We'll come back for the pack-horse to-morrow. Can you get up? Yes? Now, then!"

Together they lifted the wounded man to the saddle. Harper sat without help, and was losing but little blood.

"Can you tell me what happened?" asked the sheriff as they crossed the ford and moved slowly along. Harper briefly detailed the adventure.

"Looks queer!" said the other. "No tellin' what it means! Horse-rustler, perhaps—except about the ambulance! No! By the Devil in Hell! I see!" he suddenly exclaimed, bringing his hand to his thigh with a resounding slap. "By the Lord, it's Bagshot! He shied at the ford! The fellow was a scout—an outrider sent ahead! They were close behind him, and he has turned them aside! I'm on to him! Keep straight ahead—I'll see you later."

With that the sheriff put spurs to his horse and dashed off into the moonlit space; the others followed slowly.

Nearly an hour went by, the wounded man bearing up well though Wentworth was beginning to worry over the long absence of Thorp and the lack of a sign of the ranch-house. He was wondering if by chance he had not become bewildered and taken a wrong direction when he heard the sheriff's shout, and finally saw him, a dark spot on the bright prairie. He was dismounted, and bending over the body of a man stretched on the ground.

"You potted your game!" said the sheriff quietly as the two rode up. "I am right! He was their outrider. I went on until I found their wheel-tracks, and followed them until I crossed up with this. I know him! He's Rail Tucker, an old-time rustler and a jail-bird." The man on the ground opened his eyes. "Which way did they go?" demanded the sheriff, bending until his mouth was at the ear of the prostrate outlaw.

"Up th' river—round the head," came plainly but feebly from the lips of the man. He was clearly dying. "Curse his soul!" he broke out with fierceness. "He wouldn't let me in the wagon when he knowed I was plugged for fair! He's a coward!"

"Is there a woman with them?" asked John, who had dropped from his horse.

The man nodded.

"Good gal—wanted to help me—but—oh—I'll tell all! They were goin' to Kerrsville—then to Fort Terrel—then—oh—gimme whiskey!"

The stimulant was given, and the man revived. "Did—did I kill the other feller?" he asked weakly.

"No—only wounded him. He's with us," answered the sheriff; then to Wentworth he said: "Better go on and get Harper along; he can't stand much more. Abercrombie is only a mile further. You can't miss it. I'll stay till this is over. He's shot through the body, near the heart."

"Ye are a gentleman, Cave. Ye always was,"

said the wounded man, rolling his eyes. "Treated me white, Cave! I hain't got nothin' to say. No prayers nor cuddlin'. I've been tough, but I'm all in now!"

His head drooped. In less than a minute more his whole body seemed suddenly to turn to water, and he slipped through the grasp of the sheriff, who had been supporting him. When they turned him over he was dead.

As nothing could be done with him they left his body lying where it had fallen, his face to the moonlight.

Capturing his grazing horse, the three went on, Harper still bearing up. As they rode, Thorp pointed to the ground. Here and there on the dew-laden grass could be plainly distinguished the tracks of wheels.

"By the Lord!" said the sheriff, "we know that the villains are not behind us now. The chase has just begun."

Soon after they were thundering at the door of the Abercrombie ranch.

## CHAPTER XX

### THE DESERT

NOT until the doctor had been brought from Boerne, thirty miles away, the hardy Scotch ranch-owner volunteering for the ride, would Wentworth listen to Thorp's importunities to push on after Bagshot. The heart of the sheriff was now in his professional work, while Wentworth's loyalty to his friend kept him from at once continuing the pursuit. It was when the desperate sheriff at last reminded the young man of his oath as a deputy, and Harper himself had urged him that Wentworth finally consented to go.

By then the surgeon had dressed the wound and pronounced it trivial to a man of Harper's constitution and physique, the ball having passed clean through his body at the apex of the lung. The patient would be up in ten days, he said, if he obeyed orders and no complications set in. And Abercrombie promised the best of nursing.

But it was fourteen hours before the pursuit was again taken up by Thorp and Wentworth. It was

growing toward evening and the shadows lay long upon the ground when they cleared the limits of the ranch and plunged into what, to the northerner, was an uncharted sea of prairie. So sure was the sheriff that Bagshot would be found in Kerrsville that they traveled with only scanty provision for the future; there was no lead-horse now; they were flying light in both possessions and spirits.

Even though hours had passed the track of the ambulance had not become entirely obliterated, but led on into a wilderness of space. On the grass the marks of the wheels had disappeared, but they were plain on the patches of sand and where the verdure thinned out—patches that grew more and more frequent—which were the advance guard of the partial desert away to the west. There had been no rain or sufficient wind to disturb the easily seen ruts.

For the first ten miles the men rode rapidly and in silence, the trail tending due west and never swerving toward the Guadalupe. Finally Thorp broke the silence between them. "If they went to Kerrsville the track must trend to the north very soon," he said. "Bagshot now knows we are after him; Rail Tucker opened his eyes to that; so instead of going on to Comfort or crossing the Gaudaleupe by way of the ford where he knows he would be caught, he whips over the plains, hoping to get around us. He may be panicky by this, and shy about going to Kerrsville; perhaps he'll go on to Fort Terrel. If

he does we'll have him, for all his start. Twenty miles farther on the land is waterless. I see by the track they have four mules to the ambulance, and there is one man on horseback. They sure have grub enough to last them. The only thing that can baulk us is lack of water."

"How far is it to Fort Terrel?" asked John.

"About fifty miles, as the crow flies. It's close to the edge of Crockett County, and water guess-work for most of the way. Heaven help the woman, if he's aiming for Terrel."

Wentworth groaned inwardly.

"But you will follow?" he asked anxiously.

There was no doubting the spirit of the answer: "By the Lord! I'll follow them to the coast; and then on into the Pacific, if it is necessary. We can go where they do. I have something at stake here—and I have never lost a man on whose trail I once camped."

Wentworth set his teeth and rode on. That night they slept by a branch of the Guadalupe, stopping only long enough to rest their horses; then they pushed forward by the light of the moon. As Wentworth lay under the stars, he wondered how it fared with the girl he loved. At what a frightful inconvenience to herself was she being dragged along by those men. How Bagshot must curse her presence, a presence of which he dared not rid himself.

The young man could not know, nor did he guess, that Bagshot was now more afraid of his niece than she was of him. Neither was he aware that his enemy trembled more at the possible consequences of possessing a paper representing fabulous wealth and belonging to another than fear of being charged with a murder which could not be proven. It was not as a murderer he was now fleeing, but as a thief in a country where thieving was looked upon as a greater sin than killing.

There was but one way out of his dilemma now. His niece should be forced to give him an interest—a legal interest—in her father's map. To continue to act without it might be his undoing; with it he could face the world—could be but shake from his heels the untiring Nemesis who was following him in the shape of old Wentworth's son.

Fear! It was worse. He must escape from the vampire who kept sleep from his eyes and ease from his heart. Between him and Wentworth law was a mockery. It was war to the knife. He would kill him on sight.

Bagshot hoped that it had been Wentworth who had been shot down at the ford, but he couldn't be sure; and now he dared not stop at Kerrsville. He decided that if he went on to Fort Terrel he might terrify his niece, who, under suffering, would sign away a part or the whole of her rights. They should not appear valuable to her—he would see

to that. In any event, he would be near the mine.

In these plans the Mexican concurred. He would have concurred in anything that kept him near the girl, as he would have protested against anything that would have parted them. In the depths of his Latin heart he knew Grace Merridale detested him, even though his passion for her had grown to a white heat; but with the fine disregard for matters of delicacy characterizing natures such as his, he hoped to be able to wear out her opposition. He had no objections to her sufferings; suffering might break her spirit and make her an easier prey. At all events—the longer the route the longer Grace Merridale would be near him. With the veneer of his kind he treated her with exaggerated courtesy, which meant nothing, and really he stood between the maiden and her uncle who now almost hated her. Planet's knowledge of the country—a knowledge superior to Bagshot's, made him the present guide of the excursion.

As for the wounded scout who had been engaged as a fitting aid to the desperate enterprise—Bagshot with an oath had refused his admission to the ambulance; and Planet, who was driving, only shrugged his shoulders to the girl's appeal for the weakening man, and sent his four mules at a break-neck pace over the smooth prairie. When the scout finally fell from his horse the difficulty was settled;

dead men told no tales. The mules were kept up at full speed until cursing and the lash no longer affected them.

All this was unknown to the young man as he lay under the stars, though the knowledge of every detail came later. In the morning he was heavy for want of sleep, and the day broke with a promise of terrific heat, and at an hour when it should have been cool.

"I don't tumble to this sort of weather!" said Thorp, as he cinched on his saddle after their brief morning meal. "This is away out of plumb with the season, and I reckon it may mean something on the way. How are you this A.M.?" He spoke cheerfully.

"Rocky," was the short answer.

"A poor state to start on in and under a hot sun; but there's no time to waste on frills and feelings! Come on. Lord, but the trail is as clear as a railroad track; not a breath of wind to fill their wheel marks! I wonder if they savvy the signal they leave behind!"

But later even the sheriff became quiet. By then the horses had reduced their speed to a slow walk and urging did not mend matters. Presently there came a little wind, scorching puffs of air that moved the loose sand. It made it harder to keep the guiding wheel tracks in sight as in places the ruts were smoothed over, and it was only at intervals the

pursuers could see signs of the wheels they were following.

This made but little difference to the sheriff. The hope that Bagshot had turned north to Kerrsville had long since left him; Kerrsville was now behind, not ahead nor on one side; Bagshot had evidently concluded to take the desperate chance of reaching Fort Terrel. Once there, if menaced he could desert all and plunge into the western wilderness.

Late in the day the dogged and exhausted pursuers entered a treeless country. Grease-wood and sage-bush took the place of taller growths, and bunches of cacti told of the character of the waste over which they now traveled. Not a water-hole did they find, save two that had dried up; the liquid in Wentworth's canteen was hot and repellent. The two men now rarely spoke, because talking had become a painful effort. Lips and tongues were dry, swollen, and in danger of cracking.

The night came down blue-black, for the waning moon rose late.

Wentworth sat dejected; he knew, strong though he was, that another day like that would see him close to his end, while to go back would be as bad as to go on. What were the others doing for water? He asked Thorp.

"Better off than we be, son," said the sheriff. "They have a cask aboard, if they ain't fools."

"Will they fight if we catch up to them?"

"Fight? Say, son, do you think any one who is desp'rit enough to drive into this hell wouldn't be desp'rit enough to fight? Yes, they'll fight, all right—and shoot to kill. You ain't out on no picnic, but this is a traverse I didn't count on. Thought I'd have 'em by this."

Wentworth relapsed into silence from sheer exhaustion. His head fell forward, and he slept heavily, dreamlessly. It seemed but a minute before the sheriff touched him.

"All ready son! The day is breaking!"

And they went on. Wentworth never forgot that day, neither did he ever remember much of it. By ten o'clock the wagon-tracks were lost, only once in a while were there indications of the passing of the outfit. By noon the young man had drained the last drop of the nauseous fluid in his canteen, and which now tasted like nectar; he sucked the neck of the bottle, and was suffering tortures from thirst and the blinding heat of the sun. He turned in desperation to his silent companion.

"I would give all I have for a drink of cold water! I would give all I own to wallow in the gutter-slush of New York! Slush—filthy snow-water!"

He reeled in his saddle; his head felt big to the bursting-point, and the heat of the blasting, un-

dimmed sun felt like a weight he was carrying. He tore the hat from his head.

"Shut up, sir!" said the sheriff fiercely in a thick voice. "Put on that hat! Never talk water, nor even think water in the desert. We ought to hit Paintrock Creek in ten miles, if you keep going."

"Ten miles! Ten thousand miles! I think I see a lake! Look!"

Wentworth's mind was beginning to fail.

"Mirage!" grunted the other. Wentworth laughed as though he had heard a joke, but his voice was unnatural. He swayed from side to side; but on they went, both faces now swollen terribly, while the Northerner's was blistered; his eyes were half-closed. He looked about him, but his vision wandered.

Presently he dimly wondered how his horse could keep on going without a head, and why the land had turned to melted brass. He wanted to ask Thorp about it, but something was the matter with his throat and tongue. He felt he was going blind, but he didn't care. He was already deaf, for he failed to hear the sheriff shout at him, nor did he see Thorp wave his arms and point to the north.

He came to himself with a start. The sheriff's arm was round him—the sheriff's canteen was at his lips, and there was a flavor of whiskey in his

mouth. He looked round bewildered, but now quite sane, to find himself seated on the sand.

"Thank Heaven!" said Thorp, as he saw the light come back to Wentworth's eye. "I thought you were a goner for fair when you fell off your hoss! Think you can make a stagger at riding again? It is certain death to stay here!" "I'll try," said the young man feebly. "I—I didn't know I was so weak."

"Weak! There ain't one in a thousand tenderfoots that could 'a' stood out yesterday, let alone to-day! Say, we ain't going to be cussed by heat and a lack of water for long. See yonder!"

The sheriff pointed. Wentworth, who had risen to his feet, looked northward. A level line of dark-blue clouds lay along the horizon; a bank as straight on its upper edge as though it had been ruled. As the still bewildered man stood looking at it the purple curtain advanced perceptibly.

"A storm?"

"A norther," said the sheriff. "This ain't no time of year for northerers, they generally come in winter. This is like a thunder storm in January, up North. Heaven knows I'm glad to see it but we may curse it yet. Ever see a norther?"

"No."

Thorp made no reply. It was still horribly hot as he assisted Wentworth into the saddle; but the

latter's head was comparatively clear, thanks to the generosity of his companion, for Thorp had given his deputy the last drop of his water. But then, there was the coming norther. The sheriff knew what that would be likely to mean.

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE NORTHER

IT was thirty minutes later when Wentworth, his thirst again acute, felt the first puff of wind from the face of the coming tempest. As if touched by an electric wire, the drooping man straightened himself and took a deep breath. The clouds, inky in color, had climbed high, and were coming on like a cavalry charge. To the north the land was already black, but the air had suddenly grown strangely cool.

Wentworth had hardly time to turn to the sheriff, when a wind came that scooped up the sand and sent it dancing over the plain and rattling in the dried grass. The blast was cold—fairly icy to his fevered body—but it was unspeakably grateful. The horses lifted their heads to its breath. In an instant later the sun seemed to hiss as it met the line of inky clouds, and went out. The change from heat to cold—from light to shade—had been phenomenal.

There is no deliberation in a Texas norther. It

is the embodiment of force, being nothing less than a gigantic convulsion of nature, tragic in aspect and often in results. Wentworth's body, relaxed by the intense heat, was soon chilled, and his teeth were chattering. The air was no longer pleasant save to breathe, and it was blowing violently.

John reached for the coat strapped to his cantle and put it on, glad of its warmth; and had no sooner done so than the force of the tempest broke in a deluge of hail and rain that roared as it fell, the wind driving in a furious blast that sent the ice bounding along the ground like a stream of spent bullets.

Nothing alive could face it. Without regard to their rider's efforts, the horses turned tail to the hurricane and drifted helplessly southward; the men, with their shoulders hunched and hats drawn low, crouching under the volley that smote them. Both were drenched; talking was impossible; the noise of the wind was terrific; the plains were as dark as though the sun had set.

But Wentworth was alive at last; he was not yet numbed. As the first blast lessened in force, he slid from his saddle and, scooping up great handfuls of hailstones from the ground, crammed them into his mouth, crunching them with frenzied delight. The sheriff saw him, and was at his side in an instant.

"Stop it!" he roared above the clamor of the

wind. "I don't want a madman on my hands. Go easy; you'll be cold enough before long. The worst is coming."

And worse did come.

The hail ceased as suddenly as it had begun, but the wind did not slacken. The air grew colder and colder, the sky darker; the very land seemed to crimp. The bitter gale drove the rain in horizontal lines, which blinded the eyes when faced; the horses resisted all attempts to turn them, and still went toward the south. Both men were sluicing water from their bodies and shivering—even more than shivering; the cold shriveled their vitality; the change had been terrific.

Lower and lower fell the temperature. Soon the rain froze as it struck, and Wentworth marked a fringe of small icicles on the broad rim of his hat; a film of ice lay on the iron shoe of his Winchester, and he heard the crash of ice-crusted grass under the feet of his horse. His fingers were stiff; he was becoming numbed in body and mind. He no longer thirsted, but he was unutterably miserable; the hail had made his throat feel as though he had swallowed acid. The sheriff guided his horse to the young man's side.

"No flesh and blood can stand this much longer," he yelled. "Heaven knows where we are now, but we've got to hit some sort of shelter before long. Wind, rain, or hell, we've got to pull west for the

Paintrock, or leave our bones here. We'll freeze to death afore midnight!"

"How will the river help us?" asked John at the top of his voice.

"I know an abandoned post there, raided by the Apaches twenty years ago, and part of the place may be yet standing. It's our only hope. I wish I knowed if we were north or south of the trail. What's that?"

He pointed through the deepening gloom to a clump of cacti not ten feet away, on the edge of which something white was violently fluttering in the gale. John's languid attention was turned to it. The sheriff got stiffly from his horse and pulled the rag from the thorns on which it hung.

"It's a gal's handkerchief—for a thousand dollars!" he shouted. "See here!"

He held it up to Wentworth. The half-frozen man took the wet linen in his numbed fingers. It was surely a handkerchief —a lady's handkerchief—torn by hard usage, and in one corner were embroidered the letters "G. M."

The sheriff fairly whooped as Wentworth read them aloud.

"Blowed from the ambulance!" he shouted. "'Tis a regular lighthouse an' marks we be south of their track! Come on! Shut your eyes and use spurs. We got to get west, anyhow!"

He climbed back into his saddle with renewed

energy and mercilessly dug his long spurs into the sides of his exhausted horse. And so they went west, keeping their animals across the icy blast by dint of rowel and shout. They no longer walked, but struck a pace that increased the suffering of both man and beast.

The rain cut and froze, but the iron sheriff led the way with head down. Unconsciously Wentworth had drifted southward, but was still near enough to his companion to see him haul up suddenly on the top of a divide, then slip from his saddle. He urged his horse to the sheriff and dismounted.

"They are yonder!" said Thorp, with his mouth to his companion's ear. "By God, we have caught them! We win! The river is less than half a mile away, and we have struck the old station. They are in it. Picket your horse back in the hollow. Quick!"

With a sudden access of something like warmth, Wentworth obeyed; then he followed the sheriff, who, on foot and crouched low, made for the next swell of ground. At its top Thorp fell flat. Wentworth followed suit and poked his head over the rise.

In the distance he saw a line of straggling trees, their outlines blotted by darkness and rain; but nearer, and not two hundred feet away, were the ruins of the old post. Of what had been three or four adobe buildings, there was but one left standing with a roof. To this was a single doorless entrance

that faced the two watchers. A corner of the dilapidated structure had been battered in, leaving a yawning hole, and from it there issued a line of smoke which was caught by the wind and driven southward along the ground. In the lee of the structure was drawn up the ambulance; and between it and the wall of the house were four mules and a horse, all in the last stages of exhaustion. It was too dark to distinguish further details.

"There they be! There they be! And with a fire! All comfortable!" said Thorp, seizing Wentworth's arm. "Have you the pluck to follow me right now?"

"Go on, and I'll show you," was the quick but calm reply.

"Got your gun handy?"

"My revolver? Yes."

"This ain't no place for rifles. It's going to be close work. I'd rather wait till pitch-dark, but we can't stand it. Are you ready now?"

"Go on," was the terse answer. Wentworth was no longer cold in body; his fingers had but little feeling, but the blood was coursing through his veins. Thorp crept back, Wentworth close behind him.

Once sheltered from view, they walked northward into the blast. When well above the building and out of possible observation from the door, they breasted the divide and cut across well to windward.

Presently they were under the black wall of the house. The wind, howling like a thousand devils round the angles of the shack, drowned all sounds there might have been within. There was little danger of their approach having been heard.

## CHAPTER XXII

### IN THE HUT

WITH drawn revolvers, the sheriff and his deputy stole to the front of the house, shoulder to shoulder, and thus they came to the door. The two looked in.

The interior made a dramatic setting for the action that was to come.

Across the single apartment from the edge of the doorway was drawn a blanket hung from a rope stretched from wall to wall, which, in effect, divided the space into two rooms.

In one burned a low fire built on the ground near the ragged rent in the building, its light fairly bringing out the rough adobe slabs and the pole rafters of the roof. Near it, seated on a rubber poncho spread on the earth, sat Grace Merridale, her eyes pensively gazing into the flames, her very attitude expressing extreme dejection. Her bright hair hung in wet masses down her back, and, touched by the firelight, it glinted like gold.

A pile of grease-wood was stacked in a corner, left probably by some former camper. Otherwise the place was barren of every comfort, though two or three packs were near the fire.

The two men hesitated for an instant. The girl with the profile of her sad face toward the door, did not see them. Wentworth, devouring her with his eyes, made no attempt to enter the firelight space; he turned his attention to the dark area beyond the blanket.

Both men knew their quarry was in that part of the building. Were they sleeping from exhaustion? Could they be surprised? The mental question that Wentworth put to himself was answered on the instant.

Bagshot and Planet were there, wrapped in blankets. The Mexican was asleep, but the greater villain was wide-awake. His brain was active—too active.

Not that he now feared pursuit; he was sure that his wisdom in changing his course and not going to Kerrsville had bewildered anyone who might have attempted to follow; he had hardly taken into account the marks of his wagon tracks, less the possibility of his slain scout having been found before he died, and still less the dogged determination of the man whom he knew had his capture in view. And certainly, beside all else, no one could follow him through such a storm. To make his mind

easier Fort Terrel was now within easy striking distance; once there he would arrange matters anew.

But the continued presence of his niece had become a separate problem, and one to be solved at once. Also Planet, who was plainly in love with her, who openly took her part and would protect her interest, must be taken into consideration. He was wondering if it would not be wise to at once get up and have a talk with the girl on the other side of the screen—while Planet was unconscious and could have nothing to say. He would promise an immediate return to civilization, obtain her signature to her release of the red paper—and keep as much of his promise as was convenient to him. Planet might then go to the devil, where he belonged. He was actually considering how to open the conversation, how best to wheedle the lady into compliance with his plan, when to his consternation, the square of the doorless entrance was blocked by the figures of two men, showing against the faint sky.

At first Bagshot recognized neither, and thought that some wanderers like themselves had been caught in the norther and were seeking shelter; but as the slowly dying fire leaped into temporary strength its light struck full on the face of Wentworth, and with something like horror Bagshot became aware of the fact that he had not shaken off the man he hated—the only one he really feared. He guessed

at once that his companion was an officer of the law. The blow had fallen when least expected. But he would meet it; his determination was automatic.

Simeon Bagshot was no physical coward though he was a moral beast. He knew he had not yet been seen, and that the time for the settlement of many things had come, bringing him the advantage of position. Slowly shifting his hand to his hip, he drew his revolver and, getting to a sitting position, deliberately aimed at the center of the loom of Wentworth's body and fired. In the dark the spurt of flame seemed to reach from man to man.

For Wentworth it was a fortuitous shot. The forty-five caliber ball struck the revolver he held in his right hand—struck it on the sharp edge of the cartridge chamber—and thus saved the young man's life.

The bullet split under the impact, one-half flying upward, the other outward and downward and lodging in Thorp's thigh. The force of the blow drove the weapon from John's numbed fingers as though it had been struck with a club.

The sheriff fell to one knee with a curse, and, leveling at the location of the flash, instantly returned the shot, the ball passing into Bagshot's abdomen.

Uttering a yell of agony, the latter sprang to his feet; and this time, with unsteady aim, fired direct

at Thorp, who on the explosion, dropped his weapon and fell forward on his face.

From then on the time of action might be measured in fractions of a minute.

With the delivery of his second shot, and seeing one of his victims down, Bagshot again drew a bead on John; but, a terrific paroxysm of pain seizing him, he half-doubled himself as he again fired—and missed. Not knowing the defenseless condition of his enemy, and frenzied by the pain of his own wound, the now demoralized outlaw ran wildly for the hole in the wall, tearing down the hanging blanket in his flight. In a second he was across the apartment. Passing close to the now shrieking girl, he struck her down; and, leaping over the fire, disappeared into the storm without. So rapid had been the action, so stunning the effect of the four explosions in the narrow interior, that for a brief instant Wentworth was dazed. He was conscious of three things, however—that he was disarmed, that Thorp had fallen, and that Bagshot had escaped. Temporarily he saw and thought nothing of the girl; but as he stooped to recover his revolver, which he found at his feet, he became aware of the presence of Planet.

That individual, awakened from his always light slumber by the crash of firearms, jumped up, throwing aside his blanket, the cover falling on his revolver-hanger, which he had left aside for ease of body as

he slept. The only part of the situation it was necessary for him to know he comprehended at once.

The fire now illuminated the entire apartment; and by its light, feeble though it was, he recognized Wentworth as that young man began to straighten himself from picking up his weapon. He saw the revolver in his enemy's hand, and, being himself unarmed save for the knife in his belt, he had but an instant to act. Instead of losing time by getting his own revolver, or wasting himself by rushing on Wentworth, he drew the steel, threw back his arm, and hurled the blade at the stooping man.

As a knife-thrower, Planet was well-nigh an expert; and had the light been better, or had he not been agitated by the suddenness of the attack, his act would have been fatal to Wentworth. As it was, the steel barely missed the head it was aimed at; it passed close to the young man's left ear, chipped the adobe with its point, and, glancing from the wall, fell to the ground near the fire.

It was followed up by the body of Planet, who hurled himself over the space separating him from his enemy.

Wentworth had only time to pull the trigger of his weapon and hear the harmless click of the hammer on the chamber which had been knocked out of gear by Bagshot's shot, when the Mexican was upon him. Casting aside the useless firearm, he met the assault,

and in an instant the two men came together for the third time—now in an embrace that each knew meant death for one of them.

Had Wentworth's state been normal the Mexican would have had no chance with him; but through the extremes of heat and cold—through thirst, exposure, and lack of rest—he was far from being in his usual form. In fact, the physical relations of the two were almost reversed.

Planet was acclimated--inured. He had only suffered sharp inconvenience from the storm, and had hardly backed a horse during the entire trip. Therefore, the brute strength of the two men was now about equal, while the agility of the Mexican was superior.

In a moment the pair were whirling and staggering around the hut. Neither uttered a word. It was a silent fight. Each snatched at the other's throat, and each made good his defense; but neither could break from the hold of the other.

Three times they circled the place, narrowly escaping a fall over the body of the sheriff, who lay prone on the ground. The hot breaths of the two contestants intermingled and came in gasps. The fire described wild circles as they whirled, tottered, and recovered; neither yet had the advantage.

Wentworth knew himself to be weakening. The supple form of the Mexican was like tightened wire under his hands. He could neither catch a firm grip

on the sinuous throat, nor break from his tenacious grasp. This could not last.

Their feet became entangled in the folds of the fallen blanket, and the struggling men went heavily to the ground not five feet from the fire, but within reach of the knife Planet had cast. There was a confused thrashing of legs and bodies for a few seconds, and when it ceased Planet was astride Wentworth's chest, one lean hand had him by the throat, and the other was stretched for the knife which he reached, grasped and lifted aloft for the final blow, but in a state of desperation Wentworth managed to grasp the wrist of the hand holding the descending blade.

The grip of the Mexican was too feeble to throttle the under man at once, and with the arrest of his hand there came a test of strength and endurance between the two men, with Planet in the better position.

Wentworth felt his power of resistance fast ebbing but he still managed to hold off the knife, giving over all other efforts as useless. It seemed a matter of a few seconds when he must succumb.

Slowly, but surely, lower and lower came the steel, and the muscles of both men trembled under the strain. Wentworth's face was set and white; once he groaned. Planet's expression was diabolical;

his teeth showed in a grin of desperation; his black eyes shone as he felt his final triumph.

And the end of John Wentworth would have come then had it not been for the girl. Recovering from the shock of her overthrow by Bagshot, and the crash of the shots, she had shrunk into a corner as the two men tottered around the cabin. She did not know the cause of the assault; if she thought anything, it was that the party had been attacked by desperadoes bent on robbery—or worse, so far as she was concerned. She considered Planet as acting in her defense as well as his own, and her hopes went out for him.

It was not until after the fall of the two that she realized what it all meant. As the Mexican snaked himself from the loosened grasp of Wentworth, swung into his position astride the other, and grasped the knife, Grace Merridale saw the upturned and hopeless face of her lover now brought out clearly by the light from the fire.

The sight paralyzed her, and even the slowly descending blade failed at once to arouse her energies, but in a moment the woman in her arose superior to the conditions; strength and purpose came to her in a rush. At that instant she was a lioness, and with a shrill but inarticulate cry she sprang to the fire, pulled out a flaming brand and thrust it into the face of the triumphing Mexican.

Planet started back with a scream though without entirely losing his seat astride of his prostrate enemy. However, the shock and pain of the fire did cause him to relax the pressure of his right arm, for the moment giving Wentworth the opportunity he sorely needed. As Planet drew away from the brand, with a desperate thrust of his body Wentworth threw off his opponent, and without letting go of the hand holding the knife he pinned the man on his side, and changing the direction of the point of the blade, shoved it from him.

Unable to avoid the blow Planet's head fell back and the point of the knife entered his throat; he suddenly relaxed all effort, tried to speak, rolled over, flung out his arms and lay still. When Wentworth finally got to his feet the Mexican was dead; the knife had severed his jugular vein.

Like one aroused from a terrific dream the victor stood looking at the motionless body, his chest heaving; he could scarcely stand as he turned to the woman who had saved his life and for whom he felt he had suffered all things. As their eyes met a common impulse seized them and the next instant the two were in close embrace. Not a word had been spoken, but the girl broke into a storm of sobs. Wentworth was breathing like an engine.

"Oh! I did not know—I did not think—did not even dare to hope you would come!" said

the girl after the first gust of her emotion had passed.

"You must know what I owe you," said Wentworth, when he could speak. "I mean my life. I offered it to you in the Alamo and gathered that you accepted it. And I have been literally through fire and water to offer it again. Will you keep it?"

There was no verbal answer, nor did the man need one. "It is a serious and dramatic wooing," he went on. "It has been tragic all along. God knows I have earned you, if a man ever earned a woman. And I have been sorely stricken for now I have lost a stanch friend—the sheriff who made this day possible and without whom I could not be here."

They were standing near the body of Planet. The girl raised her white face to his. "Oh, my dear—"she began, but she was interrupted by a voice from behind them.

"Easy, my lady! I am not out of the fight, son! Would you mind giving me some of your attention?"

Wentworth swung himself around as though he had heard a shot. The sheriff had drawn himself up and was sitting propped against the door-post, blood streaming down his face. The young man ran to him, his own weakness forgotten. "Thank God for this!" he exclaimed. "I thought you dead!"

"I'm off a little from that, I reckon," was the grim reply. I hate to break up your side-show, son, but I've cinched a busted head and a busted leg; they have got to be considered. "Drag me to the fire; I'm fair freezing."

## CHAPTER XXIII

### NEMESIS

HALF an hour later the hut was bright with flame from a heap of wood thrown on the fire. The body of Planet had been pulled from the building, and Wentworth was working over the wounded sheriff.

"It is a nasty clip," he said. "The bullet cut a swath through your scalp, just grazing the top of your skull. It was a close squeak, Thorp; but you were stunned, that's all. You'll have a welt to match your father's, after this; but it is not half so serious a blow. The cold has almost stopped the bleeding. Let's see the leg." He cut away the blood-stained trousers and washed the wound from the bucket that had been brought in.

"Why, I can feel the lead with my finger!" exclaimed John joyously a moment later. "I'll cut it out to-morrow. It isn't more than an inch under the surface. You can back a horse in three days."

"Then I guess I'll pull through," said Thorp.  
"Were you hurt?"

"Not a scratch—or only scratches—thanks to Miss Merridale. It has been providential."

"I reckon, son, we can thank the lady for pretty much all of this traverse," said the sheriff, with a touch of humor in his weak voice. "Leastwise, I have a right to judge so from what I've seen."

Wentworth smiled. "You don't have to be a Solon," he said, as he looked at the girl who was busy tearing a white skirt into strips.

"So? And that's what gave you the sand to go through with the business, isn't it?"

"I deny nothing."

"It wouldn't alter my mind if you did, son. Your trail is pretty well marked. Where's Bagshot?"

Wentworth started. "By Heavens, I had about forgotten him!" he exclaimed. "He ran out after he shot you."

"But not till I hit him—that I'll swear. You bet he won't run far. You know what I came for—if you had another object. Better look him up. Carry my gun, and don't take any risks."

But there was now little risk in dealing with Simeon Bagshot. Wentworth found him several rods from the house, rolling on the ground in agony—for in the catalogue of human sufferings nothing surpasses the pain of a wound in the abdomen.

Bagshot could not rise, nor could the young man lift and carry the big body, but he dragged him to the house and laid him by the fire, the wounded man groaning and cursing in the same breath. When he was brought in the girl recoiled from him, retiring to the far end of the cabin where the sheriff had been laid and covered with blankets. Wentworth proceeded to look for the wound. He found, it a dark blue hole, and a glance told the young man that the hurt would prove fatal; it took no experience to determine that. And there was nothing that could be done for the moaning sufferer.

But the wound in the abdomen was not all that Wentworth found. Around the body of the helpless man was a money-belt, and with it its discoverer proceeded to make free while his old enemy looked at him, his eyes filled with impotent anger. The searcher knew what he was looking for and was not in the least surprised when he came upon the red paper—the cause of all his trouble—wrapped in oiled silk. Beside this were several hundred dollars in money which Wentworth returned to the belt and laid in Bagshot's hand, though that individual did not seem to notice it. For his eyes were on the young man as he unrolled the oiled silk wrapper, and their expression was sinister enough as the paper was refolded and Wentworth placed it in his own pocket. This done he covered his fallen enemy

with a blanket and returned his attention to the sheriff.

After a series of intermittent contortions, continuing for upward of an hour—and during which time Bagshot cursed, groaned and demanded whiskey—he suddenly spoke rationally, and his voice had lost the tension caused by acute suffering. “There!” he said, shifting his big body. “I’m better. The tearing has stopped.”

Wentworth went over him, bent down and took his pulse, then shook his head as he spoke to the man. “I expected this. You are dying, Mr. Bagshot,” he said, looking down on the pinched face, and well aware of the meaning of the sudden cessation of pain.

“The hell I am!”

“It would be useless to deny it, as it would be useless to say I regret it. You brought this on to yourself, sir. If you have anything to say you had better say it at once.”

“You are a damned cheerful kind of a raven to come croaking around me! Don’t try to scare me, sir; you haven’t been able to do it yet.”

“I have no desire to do more than speak the truth to you at this time, Mr. Bagshot. And you would do well to do the same.”

“Oh, I’m on to you!” was the reply. “You look for me to confess killing your father. You

think I murdered him. Well, I didn't—but I came near it, damn you both!"

"You were with him that night?" Wentworth bent forward to catch the answer, for the man's voice was growing feeble.

"Yes, I was with him—Planet and me. Where's Planet?"

"You will join him shortly," said Wentworth, lowering his voice, Bagshot gasped as if a sudden realization of the truth had come to him.

"My God! I believe you are right! I'll tell Heaven's truth about it. I got there right after you left. We rang the bell, and your father came to the door and let us in. We went back to the library. You know what we went for.

"Your father cursed us both; he was awfully excited. He made me mad. I got him by the throat to make him tell where the map was, but didn't hardly touch him when he fell. I thought he had fainted, and I tried to bring him to with ice and water from the pitcher; but I soon knew he was dead. We were in a fix.

"I didn't dare call any one, but I ransacked the drawers and his clothes. Then Planet funked, got scared; so we went out the way we came in. You see, I didn't kill him. Your murder theory was all wrong, and I knew it."

"You did kill him, for all your story," returned

John, keeping down his resentment in the presence of death. "You brought on the attack that ended my father's life, and you were his murderer at heart. You would have robbed him. You had already ruined his life by a lie—the lie on which you traded and blackmailed. Captain Wentworth committed no crime, and you knew it. I know it now for I have met the man my father struck while a mere boy. He knows you. It was Thorp—Bud Thorp. His son lies yonder—the sheriff of Bexar County. You wounded him, but not seriously, thank God! And it was he who shot you; not I."

Bagshot opened wide his eyes. "Hell!" he exclaimed. "It's all up to Shearpole! Why did he let you go? He promised to hold you."

"He didn't let me go. I know him for the rascal that he is! I escaped and was hidden in the boat that took you ashore. You robbed me, and would have robbed your niece, had your plans carried. You have been a living lie most of your life—a common thief and a murderer in purpose. May Heaven forgive, for as yet I cannot. You are dying. Do you want anything?"

Later Wentworth wished he had revised this speech before he made it. It seemed heartless, on mature thought, but at that time he was full of his wrongs, and his passionate hate for the man before him overbore what charity he possessed.

Bagshot lay still for a moment, apparently looking at the ragged wall of the room. Outside the storm still howled, the rain hissing as it tore along the roof which dripped in a dozen places. Presently the dying man turned his face toward Wentworth; his voice was singularly mild, but his eyes belied his tone.

"You are right—you are right—you are right," he repeated softly. "I am dying—going out like a shot dog. And you have come out ahead! Say—you ask me if I want anything. Yes—but not for long. That paper has been all I have worked for for ten years and more. I married Merri-dale's sister, and she told me of it before she died—told me of the old man's find and how to read the map. I worried it out of her. I confess it. I have been—a bad—man. I wanted—money. Don't take the map away from me before—I go. I love the feel—of it. Let me—touch it; let me hold—it—in my hand. You'll have it always. Please—please—as—as—you hope for—happiness."

The weakening voice and the strange appeal—childish in its nature—made the scene pitiful. Wentworth looked toward Grace. The girl, who had been listening, was white with sympathy, and her eyes moistened. She nodded. Wentworth put the thin, oiled silk packet in the hand of his enemy. He

felt he could do no less—nor more; it would not be for long.

The dying man hugged the packet to his breast, cuddling it as a child might have cuddled a favorite doll. It was a moving exhibition of human weakness, and one which did not increase Wentworth's respect for the abject man.

For some time Bagshot lay silent, the paper tight in his grasp, his eyes turned to the leaking roof; then he moved his head and looked at his victor.

"You—are a—decent sort of a—chap, after—all!" he said brokenly. "Give me water—water."

Wentworth took the cup he had found in the ambulance, and went outside. The storm was unabated, the rain even heavier, and a stream of water was sluicing from a corner of the dilapidated roof. From this he filled the cup and was about to return when he was startled by a shout from the sheriff and a scream from the girl. He bounded back into the hut and at once saw the cause of the cry.

Bagshot, with an access of strength, had rolled close to the fire near which he had been lying, and reaching out, pressed the precious paper into the center of the bed of now glowing embers. The oiled silk cover flashed up like powder and before Wentworth could reach the fire and snatch the document from destruction the light paper was consumed, its

feathery ash, stirred by the effort at rescue, floating up to the roof of the cabin.

As its total loss was assured Bagshot yelled: "There, damn your lily-colored soul!" and rolled away from the fire, shaking the hand blackened by the heat. "You thought you had me, did you? Get the fortune I've worked for, if you can! Did you think I'd be such a fool as to let you have it? Did you think to get the best of me? I win! I win! You are—a callow—ass!"

He wrung his scorched hand, and it was while he was waving it in the air that his arm suddenly fell. The next instant his whole body relaxed and he became unconscious.

At the last desperate act of the outlaw, and when the loss of the paper was a certainty, Wentworth felt a sense of defeat that was purely personal. He was tempted to take the triumphant men by the throat and shake the little remaining life from him. And yet he knew he cared nothing for the paper for himself. It had been the object which had started him on his errand of justice, but as a motive for his actions it had long since ceased to be a factor. He turned and looked at the girl, expecting to see an expression of consternation on her face, but to his surprise she greeted his voiceless question with a smile.

"It is gone!" he said. "Gone past redemption! There is nothing of it left!"

"And then the curse of it has been lifted," she returned quickly, rising and going to him. "Do not be sorry for me. I cared nothing for it—save on your account. It has left a trail of violence wherever it went! It has cost more lives than it was worth! Oh, I am glad—glad it is gone!"

"I am more than thankful that you feel this way about it," said Wentworth fervently. "To me it has not been an unmixed curse. I, too, am willing to be glad."

"But I'm most everlastingly sorry," said Thorp from his corner. "We had enough trouble in getting it—and it would have been worth millions."

Wentworth laughed; it was his first laugh for many days. "Only possibly millions—in money," he said. "And it has been worth millions to me—but in something better than cash." And regardless of the sheriff's presence he passed his arm around the girl's waist and kissed her as she bent over her fast-dying uncle.

Thorp coughed. "Well," he said, "the lost San Saba mine is still lost, though you have found enough else to console you. But my errand goes for nothing—except a bunged head and a busted leg."

"Does it?" asked Wentworth, straightening himself. "I think not. You got your man—your men."

"And you your woman," returned the sheriff,

grimly. "I can see how you feel paid—and perhaps I ought to be satisfied."

"I know I am," said Wentworth. "Under the circumstances I suppose I ought to bless Bagshot for forcing himself into my life as he did, instead of cursing him. And—ah, he's gone! May God forgive him!"

And with that he drew the end of the blanket over the face of his dead enemy.



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